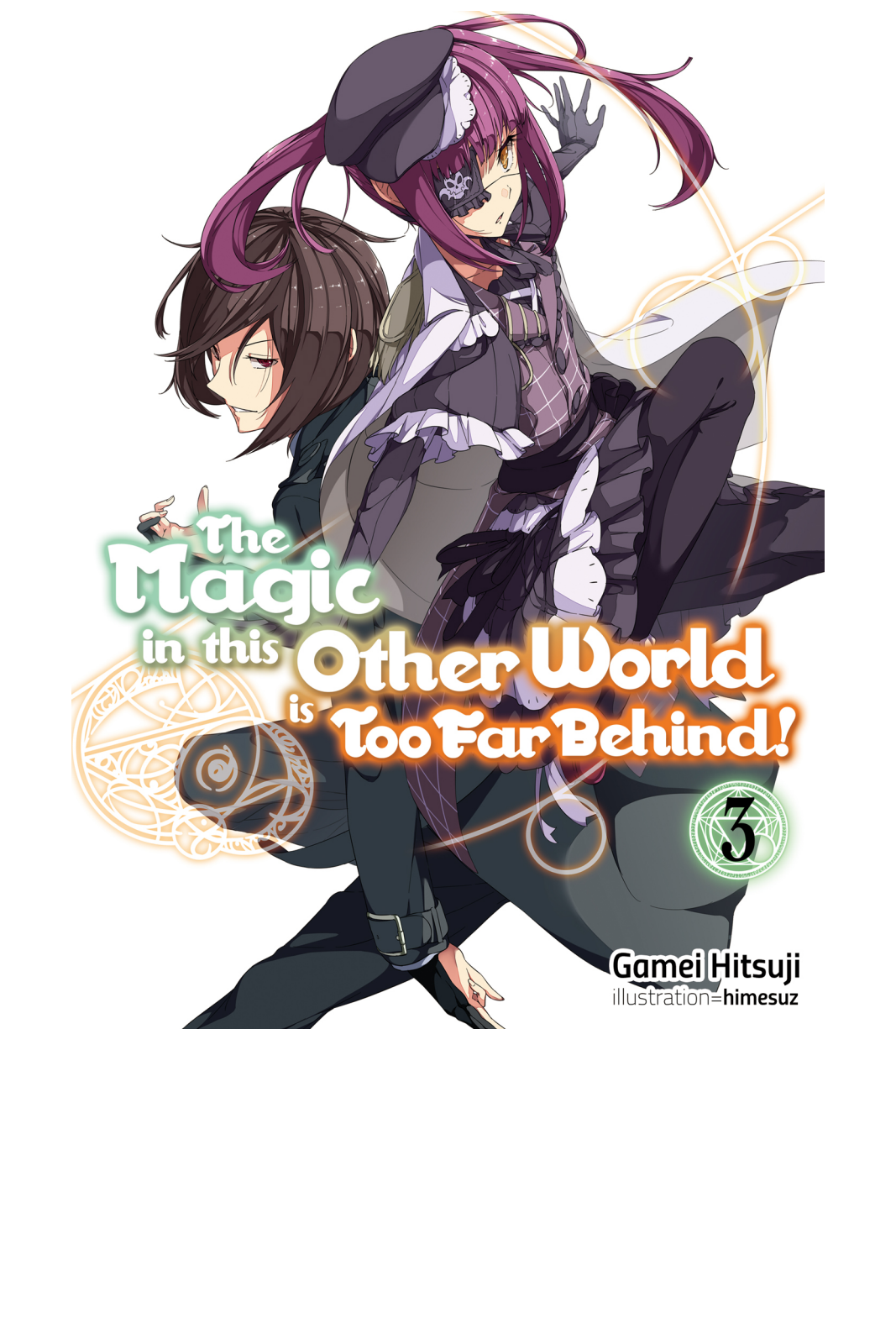


**The Magic in this
Other World is Too
Far Behind!
Volume 3**

Gamei Hitsuji

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The Magic in this Other
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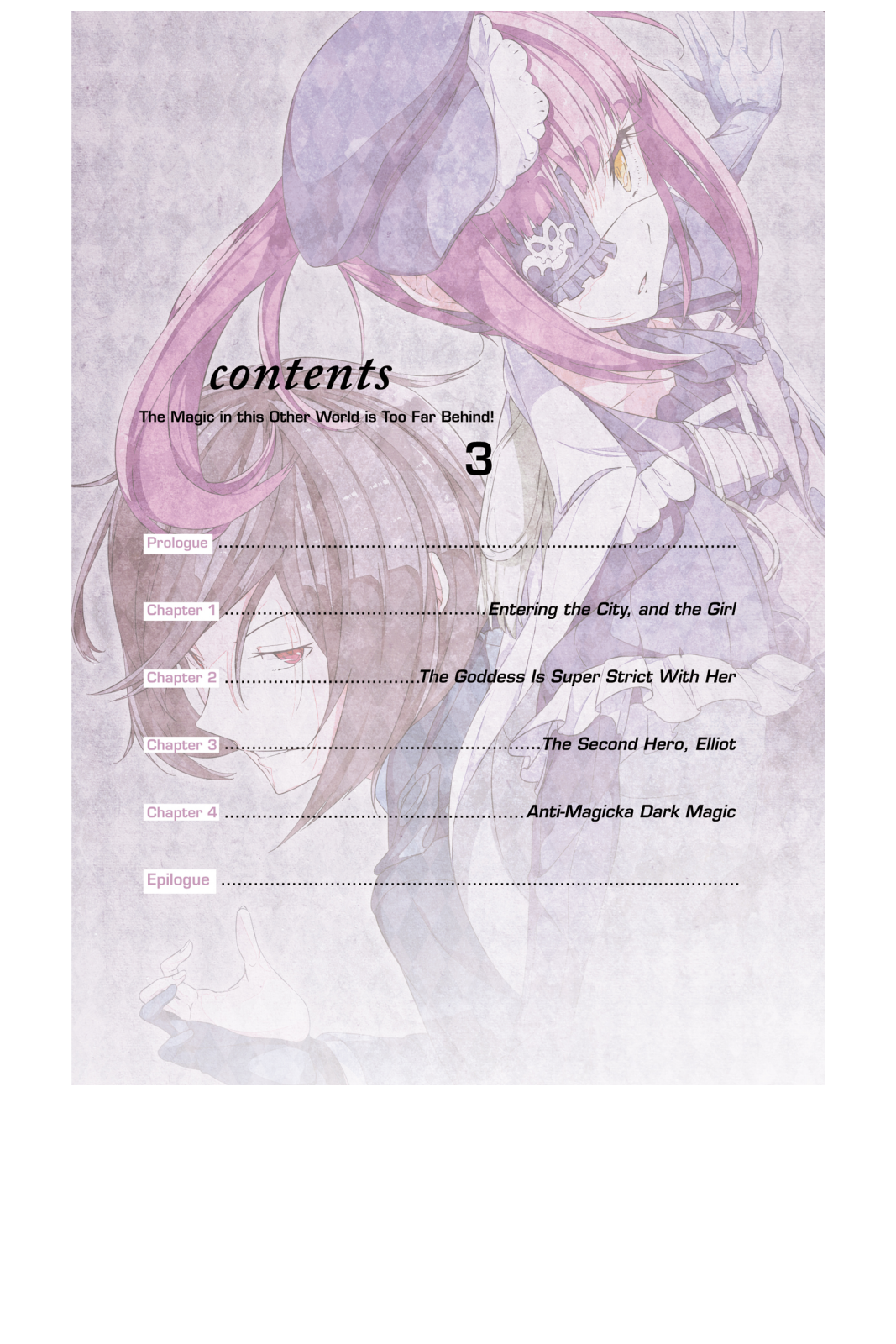


"Meow, meow,
meow, meow..."

Lilliana Zandyke

"Looks
like
you're
having
fun,
huh?"

Yakagi Suimei



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Prologue

In the dead of night, a certain block of the imperial capital illuminated by the dim light of the moon and stars was shrouded in an unnatural stillness.

With the impeccable stone pavement on the ground—packed so tightly to the point it was neurotic—and the beautiful red brickwork of grand houses rising up from it, it was undeniably the upper class district of the imperial capital. The dull luster of the moonlight skimmed the stone pavement, and the red brick walls of the buildings looked heavy—rusty, even—as they lay cloaked in shadow. One towering building in particular, perhaps because it was built in such a cramped location, looked especially oppressive in the lonely dark of the night.

In this place that seemed totally detached from the world of wooden houses where the common folk lived, where boorish stone structures littered the townscape, a single man was cornered in the darkness by two figures, one tall and one short.

“You bastards! Do you think you’ll get away with doing this to me?!”

The man shouted at the two ruffians with enough vigor that he was nearly frothing at the mouth. Wearing an overcoat made by a popular tailor in the Empire, the man reeked of gold and self-importance. But right now, he had no quarter to put either of those to use.

It wasn’t all that surprising. After all, behind the desperately shouting man were his guards, who all appeared to be sprawled out across the pavement.

“Ugh, someone! Is anybody else there?! Anyone will do! SAVE MEEEEEE!”

The man haughtily called for aid, but no one answered him. His insolent voice merely rang out in the air, passing over the two shadows standing before him before echoing into nothingness in the night. One of the figures, the taller one in a pitch black robe, then crushed any hope the man had left.

“Nobody will come. No matter how much you scream, nobody will hear it.”

“R-Ridiculous... Even in an alley this far from the street, we’re right in the middle of the imperial capital. For nobody to even

notice...”

The words from that shadow of a figure fanned the man’s anxiety like a raging fire. Even though he knew it couldn’t be true, he couldn’t put his heart at ease. Perhaps his instincts knew better than he did. For what the dark figure said *was* true. No matter how much he yelled and screamed in denial, not one patrolling military policemen or even a nearby resident came. His words, his cries, his hope, everything... It was as if it was all stolen away by the darkness.

But unable to contain himself in his panic, he continued to rant and rave.

“Why are you doing this to me?!”

“There is no need for a bastard like you to know that.”

The two shadowy figures sidled up to the man.

“W-Wait! Do you bastards want to work for me instead? I’ll pay as much coin as you want.”

“Oh?”

“There just happens to be a man that I want to get rid of! Well? How about it? For starters, I’ll pay you a hundred imperial coins up front. And I don’t mean between the two of you! I mean a hundred each!”

For his own sake, the man proposed a trade of sorts. Hearing his offer, the shorter figure trembled slightly. Assuming it was a sign they were taking the bait, the man snickered. However, the one to respond was the taller shadow.

“A hundred coins is quite the extravagant sum.”

“It certainly is! But you bastards are worth it! You knocked out my guards in the blink of an eye, after all!”

“They were weak.”

“You’re telling me... I paid a hefty sum to hire them, but they were useless in the end. But you bastards are different. You managed to corner a well known man like me, after all.”

While affirming what the taller figure said, the man gave a tug on his fishing line called praise. Then, judging that it was about time to reel them in...

“How about it? I don’t think it’s a bad offer, right?”

He seemed to think that he’d swayed them, flashing a sickening grin at the thought of his success. However, he didn’t get the response he was expecting. And the short shadow drew threateningly near as if to answer his question with actions rather than words.

“Wh-Why?! It’s a hundred coins each! That’s unheard of!”

“Certainly. However...”

The shorter figure spoke for the first time with a voice that sounded awfully young. It sounded like a child at the age where it wasn’t clear whether it was a boy or girl. The man waited with bated

breath to hear what the peculiar voice would say next.

“You said it yourself.”

“What...?”

“That you had someone you wanted to get rid of.”

“What of it? Everyone has one or two people they’d like to be rid of, right? I don’t know who instigated it, but even you bastards probably have similar motivations, which is why you’ve come for me like this. But that aside, what do you think? If you are dissatisfied with the earlier amount, I can even add on some—”

The man couldn’t finish what he was saying. He suddenly felt a powerful, surging wave of hatred and anger from the smaller figure he was trying to entice. It froze him in his tracks.

“I won’t let you get rid of that person.”

“What?! You bastard! Are you working for him?! No, it couldn’t be that you’re—”

“There is no need to speak of that... Do it.”

Interrupting the man as he seemed to realize something, the tall figure passed a command down to the short one, who immediately began muttering a spell.

“Oh Darkness. Make the nihility of thy body into a curtain, envelop my enemy, and submerge them within. Take the one who indulges themselves in such wretched desire in their entirety, and hold them captive within that curtain. Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron...”

Magic was woven together with the words the short figure spoke. From what could be heard of the chant, it was a dark, fearsome spell. However, just when the man expected to hear a keyword, the short figure began reciting words the man felt like he had never heard before. He could hardly understand their sounds, and certainly not their meaning. It was like they weren’t words at all, but the growling of some beast. And then, at last...

“Darkness Torment.”

The keyword finally came. The man thought that he saw the dark curtain around the short shadow begin to undulate mysteriously, and then the mana that enclosed that darkness swelled up in an instant. As if emulating the figure’s outstretched hand, it wriggled forth in an eerie manner. The two shadowy figures, the moonlight, the starlight, anything and everything then suddenly vanished from the man’s sight.

“STO—Ga, ah... AAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The man’s wailing was mercilessly swallowed by the darkness. Eventually, ascertaining that the man was released from the darkness and had in fact collapsed on the stone pavement, the tall figure quietly turned to the shorter one.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

The two shadowy figures then vanished into the night, taking the unnatural curtain of darkness and the stillness accompanying it with them. All that was left in the alleyway of the upper class district was the man, who wasn't even twitching, laid out on the pavement with his guards. All that peered down on his shameless face was the twinkling starlight and the moon hanging overhead.

Chapter 1: Entering the City, and the Girl

Ten days had passed since the fight with Demon General Rajas. Suimei and Lefille had crossed the national border and reached the outskirts of the capital city of the Nelferian Empire, Filas Philia.

While walking along the stone-paved highway, Suimei shifted his attention to their destination. They would be arriving shortly. When he lifted his gaze, an enormous castle gate with ornate details adorning it—one so grand that the ones in Astel hardly compared—caught his eye. It towered over its surroundings as if trying to pierce the heavens.

The castle gate was far taller than the ones in Metel and Kurant City. If the capital's outer walls were comparably sturdier too, the architecture here alone gave a glimpse into the Nelferian Empire's national power. The city was approximately twice the size of the Kingdom of Astel's Metel, and there were even cheap inns and marketplaces flooding outside the city walls.

As Sun Tzu would put it, this was a land of crossroads. As expected of a country that bordered three other countries, Nelferia was an important intersection and saw a great deal of traffic. As such, the highways that extended out to the east, west, and south were all well maintained. In no small part thanks to that, the circulation of goods in the area was bustling, which in turn contributed to the country being far more prosperous than other nations.

Originally, Suimei had planned on staying in Kurant City for a time, but plans had changed and he'd left promptly for Nelferia. The reason was none other than the girl walking beside him—Lefille Grakis.

They had gotten into a fight with Rajas, who brought along a great number of troops to advance on Astelian territory with some sort of ulterior motive. But after defeating him, because she had overused the power of the spirits, Lefille's body had suddenly shrunk and she now looked like an elementary school girl.

Thanks to that, Lefille had completely lost her power to fight and was unable to carry her weapon of choice: a blade that measured about 180 centimeters. It went without saying, then, that she could no longer undertake her journey all the way to the Nelferian Empire on her own. So Suimei abandoned Kurant City in favor of accompanying

Lefille across the border.

There was that, but there was also the matter of Lefille's curse. Just on the way here, it had manifested several times. Each time it did, Suimei would apply suppression magicka to abate its effects, but no matter what he did, he was unable to completely clear away that immoral parasite within her.

“...”

Thinking about it, his stomach turned and his cheeks burned. He hadn't done anything wrong, but it didn't stop him from feeling like it.

If anybody had seen them, even though Suimei was only applying magicka, he surely would have been branded a pedophile. It wasn't like that—not only was he just trying to help her, Lefille was actually older than him—but that wouldn't stop anyone from thinking the worst. But even then...

I can't just leave her alone...

Suimei didn't even consider that an option. There was no way he would allow her to travel on her own in this compromised state. And if left untreated, her curse would only consume her more. Based on what Lefille said, he was the only one who had the power to suppress it. Even after she returned to her proper form, he felt like he ought to stay with her until he was able to dispel the curse or find a way to negate it.

The demon or whatever that cast this curse... In the end, I guess we'll just have to beat the crap outta them, huh?

While staring at Lefille, that thought gradually took shape in Suimei's mind. The female demon Lefille had encountered with Rajas, if he remembered right, she said was a lilin. In Suimei's world, lilins were a type of demon classified as a succubus. In folklore, they were described as evil spirits who had intercourse with men while they were asleep and stole their energy until they were completely dried up. The embodiment of human lust, they gained substance, power, and physical forms. In this world, however, it seemed they were strictly a subset of demons.

In order to break a curse, something normally had to be done about the intermediary tied to the victim used to cast it. But considering the lilin was probably carrying it and kept it close at hand, Suimei concluded it would likely be easier and more effective to go after the lilin herself. It would be tragic, for example, if they went to the trouble of destroying the intermediary only for her to turn around and make another one. Better to cut off the head than the tail, so to speak.

And so that was the plan for now. Even if he had to postpone going back to his own world, Suimei wanted to help Lefille put an end to this.

“What’s wrong, Suimei-kun?”

“Hmm? It’s nothing...”

“Heehee, could it be that you’re charmed by my new look?”

With a surplus of composure in her expression as she spoke, Lefille spun around on the spot as if to show herself off. The ornaments arranged on her well-made children’s clothing fluttered lightly, and he could see a satisfied look on her face. The ever-ladylike Lefille was being unusually mischievous. That is to say, in other words...

“One way or another, you seem quite pleased. With the clothes, I mean.”

“No, that’s not... Yeah.”

As Suimei retorted with a broad grin, Lefille turned bright red and hung her head. She felt like a child who’d been called out for pretending to be mature, but it was something of the opposite. As an adult delighted to wear children’s clothing, she was unable to conceal her embarrassment. She was dressed not in her knight’s outfit—which was far too large for her as she was—but in something new they’d purchased in Kurant City.

She’d hoped to find something that was just as easy to move in for the rest of her journey to Nelferia, but the shop assistant at the clothier wouldn’t yield. As a result, Lefille was now dressed in an adorable outfit with extra girlish touches. She’d stubbornly pleaded, saying things like “Don’t treat me like a child!” and “I’m a grown woman!” or even “Something this cute... I-It isn’t my style.” But in the end, without any good reason to refuse the shop assistant’s suggestions, Lefille ended up caving and buying what she was wearing now.



Shifting her gaze around aimlessly, Lefille asked Suimei for his opinion.

“...Are they nice?”

“Yeah, even the shopkeep said so, but they really are cute.”

“C-Cute? Hearing that doesn’t really make me happy...”

Though she was pouting, Lefille’s steps became awfully light. She was secretly happy over being told she was cute. It was much the same way guys felt about being called cool by members of the opposite sex. All pretense aside, anyone would be happy about a compliment like that. Seeing Lefille like this warmed Suimei’s heart, though he had mixed feelings about the whole situation.

When I talk to her normally, she’s the same Lefille as ever.

Suimei corrected the position of the massive sword he was carrying on his back, and watched Lefille as she practically skipped along while humming. Ever since she’d shrunk, he felt like she’d become more emotionally expressive. It wasn’t like she was particularly lacking in expressiveness before, but reflecting on their interactions, she was almost always calm, composed, and mature. It made her childish behavior now seem all the more pronounced. Perhaps being in such a childish form was having an effect on her personality, but he might never know for sure.

Regardless of the cause, however, she did truly appear to be a young girl. She was only acting the way she looked, at worst. It made Suimei worry she was trying too hard, but it was of little consequence. As Suimei was pondering such things, Lefille suddenly stopped moving, made a severe expression unfitting of her young face, and looked over at him.

“That reminds me, Suimei-kun. About why my body ended up shrinking in the first place...”

“Oh yeah, I completely forgot. I did say I’d explain, didn’t I?”

“I’ve been so preoccupied that I forgot about it myself, honestly.”

Hearing her speak and seeing her look so serious, Suimei was reminded of the actual problem at hand. Because things had been quite hectic up until reaching the city, he’d largely put the matter out of his head.

But Lefille wanted to know why she’d gotten smaller. He’d had a hypothesis the day it happened on the mountain, and she wanted him to indulge her in more detail now. Suimei wrinkled his brow and stroked his chin before endeavoring with his explanation.

“Now then, where should I start? Let’s see... In the world I’m from, there’s this idea that everything we humans see is essentially just a pseudo-projection of reality. The objects we behold are representations of forms, their true essences. This notion is called the

theory of forms.”

“The theory of forms?”

“That’s right.”

“Er, so everything I see is...”

Suimei nodded, and Lefille began musing over his explanation in her head. In a world that had little such philosophy, it seemed to be a very difficult idea for her to process. He tried to think of a way to simplify it.

“Well, for example, the me that you see right now is being visually projected into your brain via your eyes. Much the same way, your other sensory organs are perceiving information on me, an object.”

“Then if you’re an object, you’re a manifestation of an essence—a form? In other words, that essence isn’t necessarily what I’m seeing... Is that what you mean?”

“Roughly, yeah.”

“But by that logic, if people are just representations of some greater ideal, wouldn’t we all look the same?”

“Since no one is perfect—since no object perfectly embodies its form—we each look a little different. We’re imperfect in our own ways, inherently giving us individual characteristics that, when perceived, make us distinguishable. That’s why you and I don’t look the same, and it’s why none of these trees, stones, or buildings are exactly the same either.”

“I suppose I can understand how this applies to naturally born creatures. All living beings have a soul, after all. But how can it be true for manmade things? Do people not create things in the likeness of their own ideas and forms?”

“Yes and no. When people create things, they’re creating objects, not forms. You might think, ‘Yeah, hey, I’m gonna do something like this,’ but what you’re doing is giving an object individual characteristics like I was talking about before. Humans may conceptualize forms, sure, but once you bring that form into being, it’s not the form itself, but a representation of it.”

“So when we give substance to things, we’re just making a manifestation of these forms?”

“That’s right.”

Suimei answered Lefille with a nod. It seemed that she was managing to digest some of what he was talking about, but then her face turned grim and she questioned him more.

“But Suimei-kun, if our existences are truly explained by this theory, then is not everything we do in vain? It would mean that individuals are arbitrarily perceived just by their characteristics as if drawn on paper!”

Her comparison to being drawn on paper was quite apt. It encapsulated the whole idea, astonishingly so. It was a very natural conclusion to come to after being exposed to the theory for the first time.

“Yep. Everything about the world we live in—including us who inhabit it—is essentially that kind of flimsy existence. Your vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch... All those really convey to you is a kind of deception.”

“Deception...”

She didn’t seem convinced. How could she be? How could everything around her, including herself, not be what she thought it was? The puzzled look on her face said she was at a loss for words. But that was only natural, considering she’d basically been told she was living a lie.

“Well, just think of it as an allegory. There’s no need to think too deeply about it.”

“Don’t say something so stupid, Suimei-kun. That theory is meant to unravel my sense of reality, isn’t it? I can’t just write that off as an allegory.”

“Well, yeah, but ultimately it’s just one concept from natural philosophy, so I don’t think you should get too hung up on it...”

“Be that as it may, let’s just say that I understand the gist of it. What does this theory have to do with why I shrank?”

When Lefille asked that, Suimei closed his eyes for a moment before speaking again.

“If you get that much, the rest should be simple. Let’s keep going with the idea that the world as we know it is basically a drawing of reality. Normal humans have a body and a soul, right? Our representations in that drawing, you could say, depend on those. Either one of those components being compromised is fatal—it erases us from the picture. But you have something special. You have a third component because you have the power of the spirits. That contributes to how you’re drawn in the pictures, but even without it, you’d still have a body and a soul. Losing it isn’t going to kill you, see? But that doesn’t mean depleting it doesn’t have an effect. With that aspect of yourself missing, the way you’re drawn in the picture changes, essentially.”

“So nothing about me has changed but the way I’m represented... That’s what happened? Because I depleted the power of the spirits, there’s nothing wrong with my body or soul, just my image... which has changed to reflect the part of myself I’m missing?”

“I think that’s the short of it.”

Currently, without her spirit power, Lefille was essentially an incomplete version of herself. She less accurately represented herself

than usual, and that had to manifest in some way. Nothing was wrong with her body, however, so it wasn't like an injury or change in her complexion would better reflect her condition. No, instead she was unwillingly perceived as a small girl. That was a much more cogent representation of what she was like without her spirit power.

Being told all this, Lefille folded her arms while letting out a groan.

"To think you even have the knowledge to be able to clarify this... The world you come from is quite an outrageous place, isn't it? Well, it was pretty outrageous to hear that you were summoned from another world in the first place."

"Yeah, bummer of the year for me, personally."

Suimei spoke with a disheartened expression, and Lefille flashed a bitter smile at his strange fate.

"To have that much power and not be the hero who saves the world is... truly something."

"I don't think I'm that big of a deal."

"Even after what you did?"

"All I did was beat the crap outta a bunch of small fries. That's really not something for a magician to brag about, I'm telling ya."

"There are also mages in this world who subscribe to that sort of sentiment, but fundamentally, I think your ideals are set too high."

"My ideals, huh? Well, you may just have a point there..."

Suimei recalled the man who embodied those ideals in his mind. Certainly, because he took after that man—his father—it very well may be true that his desires and standards were above the norm. That was just how much he strove to be like him. And perhaps having guessed what was on his mind, Lefille tried to get him to talk about it some.

"If you don't mind me asking, would your father have been able to do the same thing?"

"Yeah, and then some."

"Including Rajas?"

Suimei thought over that question carefully. If it had been his father, just how would it have gone? Of course, that wasn't a question of whether or not he would win. Suimei was treating his father's victory as a foregone conclusion. Rajas was sturdy and robust, but even in a head-on confrontation, Suimei's father likely wouldn't have even raised an eyebrow.

"He would've beat that guy in an instant with a single fist, no joke."

"A... A single fist?!"

"Yeah."

Lefille was staggered, but Suimei nodded to affirm what he'd said.

Though he was a magician, his father was largely wheelchair-bound after a battle when he was younger. His legs were lame, but it wasn't like his muscles had atrophied. And though he certainly didn't have a physique that competed with Rajas's, by mixing together the fighting techniques he'd fostered since days past with magicka as a martial art, as long as it wasn't greatly troubling to do so, he had the temperament to charge straight into things.

Indeed, when it came to combat, he boasted of dreadful skill. The magicka that he fired, even from his wheelchair, was endless. And though it was only for a few seconds, he would stand up from his wheelchair in a grand display, close in on his opponent like he was slipping through a gap in their consciousness, and using just the combat technique called the Trembling Flash of Lightning, he would thrust out a righteous fist to pierce through the dead center of his opponent, ashes to ashes. And then after using it, without fail, he would gaze at his fist and say, "Heh, I see my fist still hasn't withered away."

"Yeah, if it were him, he could pull something like that off. Putting it frankly, his strength was ludicrous."

Suimei was sure of it. If it were his father, he would intuit what was effective against demons in an instant. Using modern magicka theory, he would have been able to figure it out on the spot. Suimei, on the other hand, not only had taken time to figure it out, the whole process had reduced him to a collapsed heap of exhaustion. That wasn't a statement of Suimei's weakness, however; it was a testament to his father's strength. He was that strong even with the lameness of his legs, so his unimpaired strength was difficult to even fathom.

"He could defeat a demon general that easily...?"

"He really just might have, yeah. Seriously, how did he get that freaking strong? Well, it's not like I can ask him now..."

No, it was no longer possible for Suimei to ask how his father had come to be that way. His father had died that day right in front of him. In the middle of walking down his own path in life, he'd passed the torch on to Suimei that day.

"How do I put it? I feel like there's a preposterous gap between our worlds."

"Yeah, well... For starters, the progress of civilization here and there is completely different. When technology advances, so does humanity, you see? We get stronger. Not like you need to get any stronger, Lefille."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"We are talking about the little lady who overpowered Rajas with a single sword strike. If you're not strong already, then what are you? You've got a power that's like the natural enemy of magicians."

Seriously...”

That exasperation truly came from the depths of his heart, his honest thoughts. Even in his world, Lefille’s telesma was exceptional. After pausing for a moment on that thought, Suimei stared up at the blue sky as if he intended to pierce through it with his gaze.

“One day, I want to be a magician on his level...”



While watching the large flow of people coming and going as they continued down the road towards the imperial capital of Filas Philia, Suimei and Lefille eventually arrived at the city gates. They stood in line for entry inspection in order to officially enter the city. Annoyed by the midday sun beating down on them, Suimei squinted as he looked around at the city gates and walls. In the middle of that, he casually threw a question to Lefille.

“This is a little late, but just what kind of place is this Nelferian Empire?”

Lefille frowned like she was at a loss for words for a moment before replying to his beyond eleventh-hour inquiry.

“A little late, indeed. We’ve been in the imperial territory for a while now, you know? Don’t you already know what it’s like?”

“To me, everywhere feels the same. If I had to say what was different from Astel, then it would just be that there’s more people and more stuff.”

Admitting that, Suimei shrugged his shoulders. Everything in this world felt old and Western to him. As someone from modern Japan, it all felt equally foreign. Lefille may have been able to grasp various differences from the cheap inns and villages along the way, but from Suimei’s point of view, everything in this world was so different to him that he was clueless in that regard. Even looking around, all he could really tell was that people were dressed a little differently.

“Didn’t you investigate it in Astel’s library?”

“All I have is book knowledge, so I’d like to hear your impressions.”

“My impressions of the Empire, huh?”

Lefille pondered Suimei’s request. He wanted the frank opinion of someone from this world. Such firsthand information would likely be the best basis for making any decisions. After a few pensive moments, perhaps having arrived at an answer that she was satisfied with, Lefille nodded.

“Let’s see... If I were to describe the Nelferian Empire in a single phrase, it’s a country with strong national power. Yeah.”

Suimei disappointedly slumped his shoulders and smiled wryly at such an obvious statement.

“Y-Yeah, that was about what I gathered from my research...”

“I bet. Nelferia’s affluence is famous. Their military isn’t lacking, either.”

“However, it doesn’t really feel all that much like an empire though. What’s up with that?”

Suimei brought up the question that had really been on his mind. He understood the word “empire” to describe a nation that ruled over many races and countries with its might and clout. Successful empires were usually in the habit of expanding, so he would have expected Nelferia to be constantly putting pressure on neighboring nations, but unexpectedly, it appeared to be in a friendly alliance with them.

Perhaps it was still appropriate to call the nation an empire since it ruled over many different races and peoples, but something still didn’t feel right. And in addition to that, to Suimei, just like the majority of the Japanese people, the word “empire” brought to mind the established imperialism of present day and historical Japan, but...

“That can’t be helped. It’s true that originally it was a powerful country that annexed land from many of its neighbors, but after a war a hundred years ago, the Empire lost a lot of its power and settled into the state it’s in now.”

“Settled in, huh? So even though it was an ambitious nation, they haven’t changed in a hundred years?”

“More or less. Nelferia was part of the alliance even back then, but after the war, the other nations built up their militaries to rival Nelferia’s.”

“So even though they’ve recovered their national power, you’re saying it would be difficult for them to pull anything like that again.”

“Mhm. And the biggest reason for that is likely largely because of the hero summoning ritual.”

Hearing that unexpected phrase come out of Lefille’s mouth, Suimei donned a somewhat befuddled expression.

“The hero summoning? What does the hero have to do with a war between fellow human nations?”

“One was summoned during the war back then. A hero, that is.”

“Oh...?”

Hearing Lefille’s explanation, Suimei’s befuddlement only increased. If he remembered correctly, the summoning of heroes was said to be something that was only performed when the world was in danger. It was a ritual only performed with the consent of a conference of the highest agency held between the heads of states, the Mage’s Guild, and the Church of Salvation. So why was a hero summoned over a fairly ordinary war? While Suimei was making an odd face with his head cocked to the side, Lefille answered his largely unasked question.

“It’s something that is widely passed down as legend. At the time, the sovereign of the country that stood where the self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance currently does suddenly declared a dictatorship, waged war on the neighboring countries, and began the full-scale slaughter of citizens.”

“Yeah, okay, wholesale slaughter is pretty extreme... Why did he do such a thing?”

“Who knows? Those details were never passed down, so as far as I’m aware, it was just because he was excessively indiscriminate, cruel, brutal, and above all else, strong. And at the rate of his tyranny, people thought it wouldn’t be long before the whole world fell at his hands. A localized crisis became a worldwide one quickly.”

“Ah...”

Lefille’s explanation reminded him of something. A memory in the corner of his mind crawled to the surface. He recalled something both the Prime Minister Gless and Dorothea, the clerk at the Twilight Pavilion, had mentioned. Approximately a hundred years ago, there was a tyrant who tried to make the world his own. At that time, three heroes were summoned who went on to write the epic tale of smashing his ambition to pieces. However...

“So heroes were summoned to put a stop to the war... Ah!”

“Sounds like you figured it out. That demonstrated that the hero summoning could be carried out to oppose aggressive nations. So if the Nelferian Empire were to ever turn on its neighbors in such a fashion, and if the other countries came into agreement...”

“Then heroes might be summoned to stop them.”

“That’s right. It’s said that the Nelferian Emperor at the time witnessed the power of the hero with his own eyes and instead of awe, he trembled in fear. After that, he was quoted as saying, ‘We must not conduct ourselves in a way to draw the ire of a hero.’”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

If it was that serious, Suimei was pretty convinced. To make such a powerful emperor who had the rest of the world by the throat back down over just displaying their power, the summoned hero really had to be something.

“So thanks to things like that, the hero summoning ritual or whatever is just that feared and revered, huh?”

“That’s right. Heroes are powerful forces that can defeat Demon Lords, demons, and powerful evil beasts. It is said that a single hero rivals the armed forces of a single nation. So there’s no way that threat wouldn’t be a powerful deterrent, right?”

“I bet.”

“Because of that, even though there are skirmishes between nations, there have been no large-scale wars on an international level

for quite a long time.”

“It’s that big of a deal, huh?”

“Well, if there’s been anything of note, it would be the clash between Astel and Shaddock two years ago. That one ended in Astel’s victory due to the great efforts of Her Royal Highness Titania from the Kingdom of Astel.

Suimei’s eyes shot wide open when he heard that bolt out of the blue.

“Tia’s?”

“Tia...? Ah, you mean the princess? Yeah, I heard that she was quite active at the time.”

“Hmm, so the princess was...”

Suimei stood there, completely dumbfounded and mumbling to himself. This was unexpected. Astel’s princess, Titania, was lively, but prim. She was practically attached to Reiji at the hip, and he couldn’t even imagine her marching out onto a battlefield to take a leading role. He was under the impression her magical abilities were lacking compared to Felmenia’s, but was she really hiding some sort of fearsome strength?

He couldn’t know for sure. Even if she’d played an active role, there were lots of ways to do that. Strategy, for example. However...

Was it because she’d fought before that nobody objected to her going on the subjugation?

Suimei thought back to what happened at the castle. When Reiji and the others were being sent off, the king and the first prince along with a long line of people from the castle showed their gratitude and were reluctant to see the princess go, but not once did Suimei remember anyone trying to keep her from leaving. There had to be a reason for that, and perhaps, just perhaps, it was because they trusted in her capabilities.

“Next in line!”

While Suimei was turning all this over in his head, a voice called out to him and Lefille from the checkpoint. It seemed their turn had finally come. They put their conversation on hold for the time being and approached.

There were several members of the Nelferian military police standing within the snug room, urging on the people who’d been in line ahead of them through the doors into the city proper. A young man who appeared to be a civil officer in charge of documentation and tax collection called out to Suimei and Lefille as they entered.

“You two are looking to enter, correct?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right.”

Hearing their answers, the young man presented them with some

documentation. It looked to be a registry form. When Suimei left Metel and when he entered Kurant City, he'd had to fill out the same kind of form, so he knew what to do with it.

"Then please record your name here. Also, if you have something to signify your status, please cite it... Actually, excuse me, as for writing..."

As Suimei quickly walked up to the counter to write and Lefille tottered over, the young man started to backpedal on his request.

"Yes, I can write."

"Not a problem here."

"My apologies. Then please fill out the form. After that, you'll just pay the following entry tax and charges for passage, then you'll be all set."

Pleased with being treated quite courteously by the civil officer, Suimei began filling out the entry form. The civil officer then turned a carefree smile towards Lefille. Perhaps because he liked children or perhaps just because he was kind, as Suimei started to think he was being *too* polite, the civil officer stooped down a little.

"So would you mind filling out this form too, little lady?"

His request was courteous, but Lefille looked unhappy. Suimei thought he saw her shoulders twitch, and she made a stern expression.

"Sir, I am not a 'little lady.' Would you please correct yourself?"

"Ahahaha, I guess you're right. Sorry, princess."

"What's with that way of talking?! Are you brushing my request off as a child's nonsense?!"

In response to the way the young clerk was dealing with her, Lefille began to yell furiously. It was much like what had happened when they went shopping for clothes in Kurant City. Whenever someone treated her like a child, she would overreact in this theatrical fashion. It seemed she just couldn't let it go without making a fuss about it.

"S-Suimei-kun! Suimei-kun you say something too!"

"What, me?!"

"That's right!"

Now that she'd turned to him for help, what was he supposed to do? Surely she wasn't expecting him to say, "Actually this child shrank after getting into a fight with demons." That would only invite laughter. As Suimei contemplated exactly what he should do, the clerk turned a bright smile his way.

"Ahahaha, your companion is quite full of energy, isn't she? Must be difficult."

"Ah, no, well... Yeah, hahaha."

In the end, that was all Suimei could do. He was just trying to go with the flow, but Lefille grabbed him and shook him by the hips

since she couldn't reach his shoulders.

"Suimei-kun! Why are you just laughing this off?!"

"No... You see..."

He wanted to tell her that there wasn't much else he could do. As Lefille clung to Suimei in desperation, the clerk smiled again and nodded.

"Children around this age are always trying to act older, aren't they? I also have a sister who's a fair bit younger than me, so I understand."

It seemed he had experience with young children. But looking around the room, Suimei could see the military police were also smiling at Lefille's antics. The ordinarily tense checkpoint was filled with an unusually pleasant atmosphere.

"Ugh... Fine. Let's just fill it out quickly and get out of here."

Lefille finally gave up and returned to her usual self. But...

"Hnnngh, hnnnnngh..."

"What's wrong?"

For some reason, with one hand on the writing counter and the other reaching out for the form, Lefille was letting out a groan like she was stretching with all her might. Even though Suimei asked her what was going on, she was too focused on her endeavor to answer. With an agonized voice, she called out her unnamed opponent.

"Gah, of all the things... to lose to this kind of...!"

"Huh...?"

"Not yet! I won't give up yet! Even I have my pride! I won't throw it away!"

Saying such exaggerated things as a way to try and cheer herself on, the tiny Lefille tried to persevere. And though she exerted herself for a while, having perhaps sensed that the struggle was useless, she plopped down on the floor like a child and muttered in despair.

"I... I can't reach the paper..."

Lefille's tearful voice as she admitted defeat was adorable in its own way. She was tall enough to reach the counter, but because she didn't have enough clearance, she couldn't get to the form. Was that really what she'd been fighting so hard for?

The young clerk then walked over to her and presented her with a chair.

"Here you go, little lady. Feel free to use this chair as a stand."

"I'm... I'm...!"

Even though the clerk was only being kind, Lefille was about to blow her lid again.

"I'm..."

However, looking at both the table and the chair, Lefille gradually lost steam and sank further into depression. And eventually, unable to

say anything more, she simply hung her head dejectedly, got up on the chair, and began filling out the form.

Even with her ponytail swishing behind her, it was easy to see she was in low spirits. The short of it was that she didn't want to admit that she had gotten smaller, and having to accept help like this felt like defeat. Suimei pattered her shoulder to comfort her, and he heard her muttering to herself over the scratch of the quill pen across the paper.

"How pathetic..."

Before long, just about the time they were finishing up filling out their forms, Suimei noticed a girl appear from another door that led to the city. Suimei glanced over, finding it strange that someone would enter the room without being called in by the clerk. The members of the military police, however, all turned towards the girl and immediately saluted her.

"Second Lieutenant Zandyke!"

The girl the clerk addressed as a second lieutenant appeared to be in her early teens. She had reddish-violet twintails, a somewhat unhealthy-looking complexion, and an eyepatch covering her right eye. Based on the look in her other eye, Suimei couldn't tell whether she was tired or not, but she gave off an awfully strange impression. She was wearing clothes that gave a somewhat gothic Lolita feel with a military-style coat overtop, all complete with long gloves. Since her outfit looked like something from his own world, Suimei's eyebrow slightly shot up.

It was quite the eccentric getup. Suimei had sometimes seen people in his world dressed like this, but it had been quite a while since he'd actually seen someone in something so in-your-face. It wasn't like it didn't suit her, however. Rather, it stood out precisely because it *did* suit her. And Lefille seemed to share Suimei's opinion in that regard...

"H-How... cute..."

Or not? Apparently she had complex feelings about excessively frilly clothing now. But while Suimei and Lefille were each having their own reactions to her, the girl who appeared to be a soldier walked up to the young clerk and spoke in a tone that was so cold that it was hard to even call businesslike.

"I came to retrieve... the registry from the other day."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The young clerk straightened up with a snap as he stood to attention and saluted like he had a pole rammed up his spine. He then quickly pulled a leather-bound book from a cabinet and handed it over. Receiving it, the girl quickly scanned over it, gave a nod, and then slammed the book shut.

The Empire apparently handled its military differently than other countries. Someone at the level of a company officer seemed to be treated like she was of fairly high social standing. She had an oddly modern aura, but setting that aside, based on her looks, she was about twelve or thirteen, maybe slightly older. Being in the military at that age was incredibly unusual. It would make her a child soldier.

It seemed she noticed that Suimei was staring at her, and she turned a sleepy yet reproachful eye on him.



“Never seen... a soldier before?”

“No, that’s not exactly it...”

While Suimei was about to apologize, Lefille said exactly what he was thinking in his stead.

“It’s just that we thought you were awfully young to be one.”

It seemed something in the way she worded it touched a nerve, and the girl looked over to Lefille with a sullen expression.

“I don’t want to hear that... from a child smaller than me.”

“What?! I’m not a small child!”

Suimei let out a grand sigh. Of course it came back to this. Lefille was right back at it with the slightest provocation. As Suimei was contemplating how he could get Lefille to stop overreacting, the two girls were already squaring up.

“Would you like... to have a match?”

“Yeah, I’ll take you on.”

Seemingly intent on starting some kind of bout, the two girls stepped towards each other. Surely they didn’t intend to start a fight right here and now...

“Hey, wait a sec, Lefille.”

“Don’t try and stop me, Suimei-kun. I can’t back down from this battle.”

“Can’t back down? But it’s not... Huh?”

Lefille didn’t listen to Suimei. While keeping the other restrained with their gaze, the two girls began circling around each other. They moved slowly, but had their eyes fiercely locked so neither would miss a thing. Eventually, perhaps having found a good opportunity, Lefille jumped forward and sprang into action. The girl across from her also stepped forth as if to match her. And just as Suimei thought they were going to collide, they came to a sudden stop right in front of each other.

“...Hmph.”

“Tch...”

They were staring each other down, standing so close together that their noses were practically touching. And then, without warning, they once more leaped back and took their distance. They appeared to be back to square one now, but this time they were eyeing each other from the side.

Just what the hell are they doing?

That was all Suimei could frankly wonder as he looked at the two of them dubiously. Lefille and the girl, as if competing in some form, stood pin straight as they looked down their noses at each other. This was a confrontation, surely, but nothing like a fistfight. It almost looked as though they were deciding superiority based on height.

Suimei cocked his head to the side along with the other men in the room who were trying to figure out the same thing. The two girls went face to face once more, lined up side by side, and then folded their arms under their chests. They were performing the same senseless gestures over and over again.

Before long, having finally arrived at the answer, Suimei let out an exasperated sigh.

Oh, they're competing by comparing their breasts...

That was likely the short of it. Both of them looking like they were at the age where their assets had only just started to develop, neither one had anything going for them in that regard, but it was the only explanation that seemed to make any meaning out of their actions. Suimei couldn't help thinking it was a strange thing to compete over, though.

What made them decide to back off? Advance? Any of it? That was all completely incomprehensible to him. Did they think that the spirit and vigor they put into this would count as a plus in their favor when it came to size? As Suimei casually watched their little match, it seemed that the current Lefille was a little smaller compared to the girl.

The girl seemed to reach that conclusion too, and with a smile that was smug and self-satisfied rather than triumphant, she declared her victory.

"How's that...? I am more... ladylike... than you."

"Grr, to lose in size to a little girl..."

Lefille frustratedly conceded that much, but the girl continued to beat a dead horse.

"No. With this, you have no right... to call me a little girl. You can address me... as your older sister."

"N-Never! If I were just in my original form, then...!"

Lefille was screaming that she hadn't yet lost, and it was quite unsportsmanlike of her. In her normal form, she had a chest ample enough that anyone would take notice of it, but bringing that up now was pointless. Hearing her choice of words, however, the girl raised an eyebrow.

"...Original form? Ah."

She didn't have to puzzle over it long before arriving at an answer.

"You."

"Wh-What?"

"You should get your head... out of your dreams. It's often said that children your age... can't differentiate reality from imagination, but if you insist... on living in some fantasy, you'll end up... regretting it one day, you know?"

“Bwuh?!”

Did she mean to say Lefille had chuunibyou? Certainly if someone didn't know any better, hearing Lefille talk so brazenly about her “original form” might lead them to that conclusion. But this girl's words stabbed at Lefille like a knife. She staggered as she turned away and stumbled over towards a bench in the room on unsteady legs.

“Lefille?”

“Suimei-kun... Could you just give me a minute?”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Don't try and comfort me. It only makes me feel more pathetic.”

Suimei's smile stiffened up. Meanwhile, Lefille plopped down on the bench, grasped her knees, and buried her face in her lap without moving. A profound darkness, far darker than the aura wielded by the demons, surrounded her. It had been nothing but one insult after another today.

The other girl then took a few steps towards Suimei.

“You do not appear... to be one of this nation's people. Where... did you come from, foreigner?”

“Uh, I'm from the East. And that girl, Lefille, is the daughter of an acquaintance of mine.”

“The East, you say...? You don't mean Astel... but further east than that, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

She was speaking to and looking at him as if cross-examining him. She seemed to be mentally going through all the various peoples in and around Astel to try and determine where he'd come from, but she had a strange reaction to Suimei's answer.

“As... expected.”

She muttered to herself with her eye closed, then opened it and turned a gaze as sharp as a falcon's on Suimei.

“Hey now...”

“S-Second Lieutenant!”

Suimei let out a low, reproachful voice right back at her, and the young clerk in the room sounded quite alarmed. When Suimei declared that he came from a country outside of Nelferia's alliance, the young soldier apparently came to the conclusion he might be a spy. And when he started to feel hostility and mana coming from her, his sense of danger only multiplied.

“What did you... come here for?”

“I don't see any reason I should have to answer that.”

When Suimei replied curtly, the girl unleashed even more of her mana. If she were confronting any normal human, it wouldn't have been unusual if they'd fainted in her presence now.

“S-Second Lieutenant! P-Please calm—Eek!”

“...You’re in the way.”

With that, the girl scowled at the clerk and turned her mana on him. Feeling the pressure, he instinctively backed up and bumped into a desk. They were supposed to be on the same side, so just why was this girl throwing around her hostility so indiscriminately? Even the members of the military police present had stiffened up and made no move to oppose her. The crestfallen Lefille lifted her head when she picked up on the tense atmosphere and came running over.

“What’s going on all of a sudden?”

“This has nothing... to do with children. Just go back over there... and be quiet.”

“You want me to just sit by and watch while you throw around that kind of dangerous aura?”

“That’s right. This is... what needs to be done... with the one liable to bring harm to the Em—”

“What are you talking about?”

Lefille coldly cut her off, throwing a sharp gaze and sharp words at her. No one would have known she was sulking from her previous defeat just moments ago.

“Who gets that hostile with someone who’s just following the rules and legally trying to enter the country? To treat people like this without just cause... Is the imperial army here really that uncouth?”

“What... did you just say?”

“What happened to the army that was extolled for its strictness of integrity above all other nations? And what about the main principles of the imperial doctrine, article twelve, clause three? Could you say that your actions right now are properly upholding that doctrine?”

In response to Lefille’s statement, the girl’s expression became extremely bitter. What Lefille had just referenced seemed to be a regulation of the imperial army. Called out on that front, the girl directed a stare at Lefille that was as sharp as any rapier, and then decided to back down in honor of said regulation.

“Very well. I... will relent.”

Pausing for a moment there, she once more turned towards Suimei, and threw him a frosty look too.

“However, this is the Empire. Do make sure... you don’t try anything funny.”

And in response to her frigid tone, Suimei replied in a slightly joking manner.

“And what if I say I will?”

“I’d kill you.”

She spoke with no hesitation at all, and her voice was icy cold. Those must have been words she was quite familiar with. Though it may have just been an attempt to provoke him, Suimei wondered if

she'd really go that far over him merely saying something. If this were Japan, this girl would be just about the age she was entering middle school. To hear such a young girl say something so threatening, Suimei was left with incredibly mixed feelings.

Naturally, he understood that part of that was because of his mindset as a modern man. He had certain expectations for children, especially coming from a largely peaceful country. But when civilizations differed, so did their ethics and morals. It wasn't that unrealistic that the age of enlistment was much lower in a medieval world like this. It just made the difference between this society and the one he knew all the more striking. But for Suimei to show pity for a child soldier here was in a sense, culturally insensitive, if not just plain rude and condescending. Of course, it wasn't like he approved of the child soldiers, either. He was conflicted. For a moment, he nearly replied to her with pity in his eyes, but he promptly stopped himself and kept up with the joking tone.

"Oooh, what a scary little girl."

"Little girl? It was one thing... coming from that child, but from an adult like you who should have more discretion... It's slander. I'll take you... to the imperial military court."

In response to Suimei's mocking behavior, the girl made a sullen face and thrust an emphatic finger out at him. Her antsy, frustrated demeanor was unexpectedly charming in its own way. Meanwhile, Lefille was still scowling and muttering.

"You're still on about that...?"

"Now now..."

Sensing that the immediate danger had passed, the young clerk timidly tried to butt in to mediate. The girl, however, seemed to understand that Suimei was joking, and she turned to him without any of the intimidating fierceness from before.

"I'm leaving."

With that, she took the registry she'd been handed and went back through the door into the city.

"Phew... This is kind of a bad omen before we've even entered the city, huh?"

With the tension cleared from the air, Suimei let out a sigh of relief. The young clerk followed up with an even bigger one.

"Please do refrain from making such provocative remarks. That girl is Second Lieutenant Zandyke, after all."

"Ah, yeah, sorry about that."

As Suimei awkwardly scratched the back of his head, Lefille spoke up. It seemed she'd recalled something.

"I see. I thought I recognized that last name, but was that Liliana Zandyke?"

“You know her?”

“Her father is one of the Seven Swords, Rogue Zandyke. Even in the Empire, she’s a distinguished mage. Despite being so young, I’ve heard that she’s remarkably talented and has even been made one of the Imperial Elite Twelve.”

“Hmm... If Mizuki heard that, she’d be ecstatic.”

The Seven Swords, the Imperial Elite Twelve... That was the kind of juicy fantasy material that Mizuki lived for, and it was enough to tell Suimei that this girl was actually quite a bigshot. Even on Earth, there were similar titles given to distinguished magicians and swordsmen. It likely worked the same way here as well.

After Lefille speculated on the girl’s identity, the clerk nodded to confirm what she’d said.

“Yes, that’s right. That’s why I believe you should avoid acting in such a way where she might have her eye on you.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Suimei accepted the friendly warning, and conversation came to an end. The clerk then urged Suimei and Lefille over to a bench.

“Now then, I need to go finalize these papers, so please just wait here a moment.”

While Suimei was scrutinizing the vestiges of the girl’s mana, Lefille sat down on the bench and dangled her feet around as if to distract herself from the tedium. The military police then called in the next people to enter: a small group of what looked like travelers. While they were filling out their forms, they struck up a conversation with the young clerk.

“Hey, did you hear? They’re saying a hero was summoned in Astel.”

“Yes, if I am not mistaken, he’s called Reiji-sama. Lots of people are talking about him.”

Hearing the familiar name of his good friend, Suimei’s ears twitched. Lefille, who knew of Suimei’s circumstances, turned and whispered to him.

“Suimei-kun, that’s...”

“Yeah, they’re probably talking about my friend.”

It hadn’t even been all that long since they’d departed on their journey, yet travelers had already heard the news. He must have done something to earn a reputation for himself. While Suimei secretly praised him for accomplishing that, the two traveling men continued their conversation with the clerk.

“He was acknowledged by the most prominent members of each attribute in the Mage’s Guild and given the title Attribute Master.”

“Oh yeah, for how he could manipulate magic of all attributes, right? Man, the Attribute Master...”

“It is a splendid title, isn’t it? Attribute Master. I am but a civil officer, but I look up to him.”

Hearing those two words repeated three times, Suimei was starting to lose control on the floodgates of his laughter.

“Tch... Pfft... Seriously, knock it off...”

“...?”

Watching Suimei try to choke back laughter, Lefille stared at him blankly. Neither one of them was prepared for the surprising declaration the travelers made next.

“I hear that he recently led a force from Astel against an invading army of demons attacking Kurant City and exterminated them all.”

“Not only that, I hear he even defeated a demon general too. If I remember right, it was the one called Rajas, I think?”

Lefille was the first to react, and Suimei quickly followed suit with a puzzled expression.

“Wha?!”

“Hey now... What’s going on here?”

The young clerk, however, sounded completely impressed.

“It truly is amazing. It hasn’t even been that long since he was summoned, and he’s already got such achievements to his name...”

Suimei and Lefille were impressed too, to be fair, but it was for a very different reason. They exchanged knowing looks with each other. It seemed that, completely unbeknownst to them, the story had taken a strange turn somewhere.



His horse raced across the ground muddied by the recent rain. Before the kicked-up mud could fall back to the earth, he’d spurred his horse on faster and was long gone from the spot. The minute amount of water splashing into the air sparkled like faint gray crystals thanks to the still gloomy skies.

It was a few days before Suimei and Lefille arrived in the imperial capital of Filas Philia.

After hearing of Suimei’s crisis from Gregory, Reiji took off on horseback and was soon joined by Mizuki and Titania, who chased after him. The three of them crossed the border between Nelferia and Astel, coming upon the woodlands that spread out to the east of Kurant City.

Splitting off from the highway, they were just about to arrive at the tree line of the vast woodlands using paths that could hardly be called roads. All they could see before them was green as far as the eye could see. Riding next to Reiji, Titania gripped her reins tightly and called out to him.

“What luck we had, finding some horses along the way... If not for

that, we may never have caught up with you, Reiji-sama.”

What she was talking about with a relieved expression was her good fortune in managing to join back up with Reiji. Finding out about his good friend Yakagi Suimei’s crisis, even knowing he was being foolish, Reiji had dashed off on his own. Titania and the others followed after him, and on the path back to Astel, they’d luckily managed to find and borrow some horses. With those, they were able to catch up to Reiji while he was letting his horse rest partway to his destination. Reiji, however, seemed to feel differently about it and spoke to her apologetically.

“Yeah... But isn’t this wrong, Tia? You ended up getting dragged into this because of my selfishness...”

“It is hardly a matter of right and wrong in such a fashion. You needed to go, and that was all the reason needed to come. It is my duty to accompany you.”

“Sorry, this time, it’s...”

Yes, this time, he was the one at fault. Both for the demons advancing into Astel, and for running off on his own. To say that he was the cause of it all wouldn’t be wrong. And now that the girls had come along, he knew that he was responsible for them too. He felt guilty. However, as if she wasn’t worried at all about his internal remorse, Titania shook her head with a smile.

“No, this situation is hardly your fault, Reiji-sama. The ones to throw Suimei into a trap were the nobles from my country. And we were the ones who summoned you and your companions to this world in the first place, which was really how this all got started. As a royal of Astel, it is my duty to assist you, the hero. You needn’t feel responsibility for that.”

“Yeah, thanks...”

“Do not trouble yourself over it. Rather than me...”

Titania glanced over her shoulder as she sat up in her saddle. There was no need to ask who her anxious look was directed at. Riding behind them was the other girl who’d been wrapped up in this because Reiji decided to act on his own.

“Mizuki...”

Still unable to ride a horse on her own, Mizuki was sharing a horse with Luka and holding on to her as they rode along together. She was not yet used to the terror of battle and was still somewhat shaken from their last encounter, but nevertheless, she was headed off to a place where a large demon army was gathered. She swallowed her fears to follow Reiji. He was honestly happy she was so brave and supportive, but Titania voiced his concerns for him.

“Mizuki, there is no need to force yourself. If you think that you cannot fight, do back off without fail. Understood?”

“But...”

Mizuki was hesitant to accept such a suggestion. Suimei was her friend too. Knowing he was in danger and having come this far, could she really back off now without doing anything? Her conscience ate away at her. And as she was seized by embattled emotions, Reiji gave his own opinion on the matter.

“Mizuki, it’s okay not to force yourself. If something happened not just to Suimei, but you too, I...”

He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself. That’s why he wanted her to step back without any hesitation.

“Reiji-kun...”

“That’s why, if things get unreasonable, we’ll have you retreat with Luka somewhere safe, alright?”

“...Alright. But Reiji-kun, don’t do anything too reckless yourself, okay? I mean it.”

“Yeah, I promise.”

With a somewhat sorrowful expression, Reiji lied to reassure her for the time being. That’s right, his words were nothing but a farce. It was obvious. He could make the promise, say the words with his lips, but nowhere in his heart did he have any intention to keep it.

After waiting for Reiji and Mizuki’s exchange to end, Titania called out to him.

“Reiji-sama, what are you thinking of doing from here?”

“Well, first I was thinking we should get closer to where we think the demons are. We may not have the time to do any real scouting, but we don’t yet know where Suimei and the others are. Once we can confirm the size of the demon forces, I think it’ll be good to find a place to hide.”

Their number one priority was saving Suimei. There was no need to go out of their way to pick a fight with the demons. Taking a tactical approach would help make sure that they found what they needed to after getting a firm grasp of the situation. There was no denying that the odds of finding the trade corps intact and Suimei with them were depressingly low, but even then...

“Oho, are you not going to break directly through the demon front?”

“No way! Even I know that would be unreasonable.”

“Good, it seems you have not forgotten to remain calm. It appears my concern was unnecessary.”

“Was that a test? How shrewd of you, Tia... Well, how about it?”

“Let me see... I think it is sound to make a call after fully assessing the situation.”

Satisfied with Titania’s support, Reiji decided to ask her what she would have done had he answered the opposite way.

“Hey, Tia... If I said I wanted to cut through, what would you do?”

“I would accompany you.”

“That’s...”

“I do believe I mentioned this before we departed on our journey, Reiji-sama, but accompanying you is my duty. Even if you rush into battle to perish, I shall follow.”

Just what was it that she was looking at as she stared into the horizon? What was it that she could see? It looked as though she was staring right into the difficult times to come. She appeared somewhat aloof, but solemnly resolute. Seeing her like that, Reiji was at a loss for words. It was true that her voice was both reassuring and direct. That was a manifestation of a little thing she had called determination. As expected, Titania wasn’t just some young girl following along because she’d been told to. She’d decided that it was something she must do herself. She’d taken her fate into her own hands, and that was why she was now by his side.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, I was just thinking that you’re amazing, Tia. I’m not even in your league.”

She didn’t seem to fully grasp the significance of those words that seemingly came out of nowhere, and sat there on her horse with her head tilted to the side. As the princess of a nation, Titania had a much stronger will than someone like Reiji. Before her determination, Reiji’s resolve was nothing more than bravado. Seeing her in such a royal light, Reiji felt completely inferior to her.

But as things were, he had no time to dwell on it. Dismissing all such thoughts, Reiji pushed the conversation onward.

“Tia, based on that plan, which way should we go from here?”

“First we should proceed to the north. The woods that spread out to the east of Kurant City are sparser to the northeast rather than the southeast. The elevation is better there as well, so it would be the most suitable choice for surveying the situation.”

“Got it. Let’s go.”



Urging their horses northward, Reiji and the others proceeded down a path that reached the mountains and was surrounded by groves of trees. Looking up, the sky was filling with ominous clouds. It was almost as if the weather was reflecting the anxiety and unrest Reiji and his companions felt as they approached the destination. Despite being in the middle of a verdant forest, all around them only seemed to be filled with shadows and gray gloom.

While they were cautiously advancing on horseback in complete contrast to their hurried pace up until now, they noticed a presence up

ahead and sped up once more. They quickly came across a few members of a detachment who appeared to be wearing the uniforms of Astelian soldiers. A man who appeared to be the unit commander then fired off a stern order to Reiji and his party.

“Stop right there!”

In order to avoid a collision, Reiji and the others pulled back on their reins and stopped before this man. The neighing of the horses echoed through the wooded area. And following that, seeing that Reiji and the others had come to a stop, the man shouted at them with the same stern expression as before.

“Who the hell are you bastards?! Answer me!”

“We’re...”

Reiji meekly began to answer, but the eldest knight of their group, Gregory, stepped forward, and rebuked the soldier who stood in their way.

“You insolent bastard! Just who is it that you think you’re obstructing?! Behold Her Highness Titania and the summoned hero Reiji-sama! Stand down at once!”

“Wha?!”

Under the pressure of Gregory’s thunderous shouting and his severe glare, the soldiers all raised surprised voices, recoiled back, and immediately humbled themselves. There was a great number of eyes timidly looking at Reiji’s group now. There was a stir of whispering, and eventually, something seemed to click. When they finally reconciled what Gregory had said with what they were seeing right in front of them, the soldiers fell to their knees all at once and, to compensate for the discourtesy they’d shown previously, treated Titania and Reiji with the utmost respect.

“M-My deepest apologies! I beg of you to forgive my impoliteness.”

“So granted. From the looks of it, you appear to be in the middle of a patrol. Are you the stationed troops from Kurant City?”

“Yes, Your Highness. We are part of His Grace Duke Hadorious’s army.”

The soldier replied respectfully to Titania, but his words sparked a strange tension between Reiji and the others. Titania, well accustomed to maintaining appearances, didn’t let it show.

“Duke Hadorious himself is present here, is he not?”

“He is encamped just up ahead, Your Highness.”

“Guide us to him.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The surrounding soldiers, all still sweating bullets, turned around and advanced down the path to escort them. The sound of rustling leaves being trampled underfoot by the soldiers’ boots filled the air.

Titania willingly followed after them, but just as Reiji was about to follow as well, Luka's horse suddenly came up to him. Mizuki, who was sitting on the horse behind Luka, leaned in towards Reiji and spoke to him in a hushed whisper.

"Reiji-kun, Duke Hadorious is that..."

"Yeah, the noble who set Suimei up. I didn't think he would be here."

"A-And we're going to see him?"

"Looks like it..."

An adversary lay ahead of them. Seeing Reiji's eyes narrow as he glanced down the path, Mizuki's body stiffened up. They were about to go see the man who'd set up their friend. It might just be too much for the anxious Mizuki to handle. Or so Reiji thought. But though she looked concerned, she spoke with great composure.

"Reiji-kun, you can't act rashly. Even if Tia is with us, we don't know what'll happen if you lay your hands on a noble."

"Ah... Yeah, I got it. Thanks for worrying about me, Mizuki."

Mizuki was mostly worried about Reiji losing himself to anger and rushing in. But he wouldn't do that. He couldn't. It would have been one thing if he were on his own, but if he snapped now, there was a high chance Gregory would be implicated for sharing confidential information. So long as he had the other people with him to think about, Reiji would keep his cool.

Before long, a clearing opened up among the bundled evergreen trees. It was filled with a large gathering of knights, soldiers, and mages. Though the uneven ground had been muddied by the recent rain, the organized files of troops appeared to be having no trouble with the terrain whatsoever. They walked with firm, resolute footsteps and gave off an aura of true grit. Just how much did they train?

Right in the center of the outstandingly austere atmosphere appeared to be the person who'd brought this group together—a large man in the prime of his life wearing jet black armor.

He appeared to be about forty years old, right around Gregory's age or perhaps a bit younger. He donned a well-groomed beard and a large scar running down his left cheek from his brow. He was close to two meters tall, and he appeared to be a muscular man. In spite of his relaxed posture, he radiated a strong aura of authority that made those around him stiffen up.

All in all, he immediately gave the impression he was the man in charge. That much seemed to go without saying. Perhaps to report their arrival, the soldiers who'd escorted Reiji and the others went ahead of them into the camp. And then, after exchanging two or three words with that man who appeared to be the leader, he gestured to the soldiers and knights around him as if to tell them to make way.

Mere moments later, the masses parted and made a clear path.

The man then drew closer to Reiji's group. He approached Titania without any hesitation at all, and with his commanding aura still in full force, took a knee and demonstrated the etiquette of a retainer. When Titania eventually welcomed him to be at ease, the man—Duke Hadorious—stood up.

“Your Highness, it has been a while since we last spoke. Was it the evening party several months ago when we last had the pleasure of meeting?”

“It hasn't been long enough, Duke Hadorious. I see you're the same browbeater you've always been.”

“Oh, you flatter me, Your Highness. To a princess like you, something like this is but a light breeze, is it not? Though it may be presumptions of me to say so, I, Lucas de Hadorious, thought perhaps I might be able to offer you some refuge from the dreary weather with a welcome greeting.”

“Just what is welcome about this? Your unwanted concern and consideration are quite the opposite.”

All present were rendered speechless at the exchange between Hadorious and Titania. It was amusing to a degree, but also intimidating. Titania made it quite clear she wasn't pleased to be in this situation or his presence. She poured palpable scorn down on him from high atop her horse.

And between the two of them, a completely different kind of tension filled the air than before. However, Hadorious didn't seem the slightest bit affected by her words. He didn't even try to laugh it off as a joke. He simply replied in a disingenuously obsequious tone.

“I see Your Highness is as thorny as ever. Now, let's see... The boy there with you is the summoned hero Reiji Shana-dono, correct?”

“Yes.”

After affirming Reiji's identity, Hadorious turned his prideful yet intimidating gaze on him. Titania had called him a browbeater, and perhaps this was just the kind of behavior she was talking about. Pondering that, Reiji stared right back at Hadorious as if to say he wouldn't back down.

This man is...

This was indeed the man who'd set up Suimei and the trade corps. This cruel man who made no attempt to hide his conceit in his words, dress, or demeanor. Reiji was burning with anger in his presence, but for now, he had to fight it back and maintain his composure.

After a pause, Hadorious closed his eyes and addressed Reiji.

“My apologies for the late introduction, Hero-dono. I am the one entrusted with the western territory by His Majesty the King. My name is Lucas de Hadorious. Upon hearing of the advance of demons

across our borders, I led my troops here. From here, we plan to exterminate the demons and were just about to take action.”

Hadorious haughtily introduced himself and explained his goals, but he didn’t stop there.

“Now, Your Highness Titania, Hero-dono, what brings you here?”

In response, Reiji answered with a line he’d prepared beforehand.

“Due to the increase in activity of the demons’ movements in Astel, we rushed over from the Nelferian Empire and have just arrived.”

“Truly? Then I must apologize for troubling you.”

“No, this is also my duty as a hero.”

Reiji concluded their exchange in a very businesslike manner, and Titania immediately began to question Hadorious.

“Duke Hadorious, are the demons beyond here?”

“Judging from the information we have, we do believe they are.”

“Then the discussion you were having just now... was about the means of attack?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Once our scouts return, we were thinking of taking action right away.”

If they’d already sent out scouts, that meant Reiji and the others arrived just as they were about to make their move. Judging from the scale of the deployed army, they appeared to be staging their attack from here. Something struck Reiji as strange about all this, and he cut in on the conversation.

“You mean attacking the demons? Aren’t your numbers a bit insufficient for that?”

Based on the number of people in the clearing, it certainly didn’t look like there were enough of them. At a glance, there were one to two hundred people at best. Since the army they would be going after was over a thousand strong, it just didn’t add up.

“Make no mistake. This is not my entire force, Hero-dono. So that we can launch our attack from several directions at once, there are soldiers deployed to the north and south as well. And even in this area, we have many soldiers concealing themselves. Do be at ease.”

“Is that so? Pardon my concern then.”

“In truth, I would prefer a unified charge with the soldiers from Metel, but due to the preparations involved and the bad weather, Kurant City and Metel are more or less divided. A joint operation is out of the question, thus we have settled on the current tactic. I would implore you to take into consideration we’re working with what we have.”

Hearing Hadorious’s plan, Reiji decided to make their intentions clear too.

“When the scouts return, I think we’ll also make our move as

well.”

“My, what vigorous enthusiasm you have. If I might be so bold as to suggest it, however, why not spare your energy and let us handle things here, Hero-dono?”

Hadorious presented his offer with a veneer of courtesy, but that couldn't disguise the sneer underneath it. Reiji could distinctly see the corners of Hadorious's mouth subtly slanted upwards.

“I cannot. But you may stand back and let us handle this if you wish. I am a hero. I will do what I must to the best of my ability.”

“Hmph, so be it. Though I do not have the slightest idea as to what your goal here is, Hero-dono, if you say that you will advance towards the demon army, then I will gladly accompany you.”

Letting his steadfast expression crumble at last, Hadorious flashed a fearless smile. Reiji was infuriated. This man knew good and well why he'd come.

Reiji was spurred by the urge to turn around and look at Gregory, but managed to suppress it and continued to stare down Hadorious. Hadorious then excused himself and went back to the center of the soldiers after imploring Reiji and the others to wait for the scouts' return. Was that it? Was he just going to leave it at that? Considering he was in the presence of the princess and the hero, his behavior was rather rude. Titania, however, seemed unfazed by this. She simply narrowed her eyes as she watched him walk away.

“He's the same as ever.”

“It's rare for you to talk like that, Tia. You don't like him, do you?”

“It's just as you saw. I have a favorable impression of him in that he does not resort to flattery, but that intimidating, condescending air of his stirs my defiant heart.”

She gave her evaluation in a low voice, and Reiji picked up on something as she spoke. Something unexpected.

“...Do you hate to lose, Tia?”

“What?! No, well, um... More importantly, after meeting Duke Hadorious, what do you think of him, Reiji-sama?”

“Well, it was unexpected. That he's that kind of man, I mean.”

Reiji gave his honest impression of Lucas de Hadorious. Because he'd used such underhanded means to entrap Suimei, Reiji had been expecting something a little different. The stereotypical image of some gremlin-like noble came to mind. It turned out his imagination was way off, but in a way, this was much worse.

“You mean that you thought he would be some pathetic scumbag, but in reality, he was a much nastier man than that?”

“It's not that extreme, but... You really hate that jerk, don't you, Tia?”

“Don’t you as well, Reiji-sama? This marks the first occasion I’ve ever heard you refer to anyone as ‘that jerk.’”

“Huh...”

Having it pointed out to him, Reiji realized she was right. He’s said it completely without thinking. He’d meant to be careful in his choice of words, but he couldn’t hide his disgust in the end.

After their exchange, Mizuki called out to Titania with a somewhat antsy expression on her face.

“I-Is that man also fighting? Isn’t he a noble?”

“Duke Hadorious hails from a long line of distinguished warriors even in Astel. He also possesses tremendous skill in military arts.”

That was as much as Reiji had expected. The intimidating air he gave off was beyond the norm, he was unafraid to take the front line, and his well developed body indicated the serious training he put into it. He came across as a military man through and through. Mizuki, however, had a somewhat strange reaction to learning this.

“Wh-What about that huge scar on his face?!”

“That? I’ve heard the scar on his face is something he received in a battle quite a long time ago. I have never seen him fight myself, but I have heard his true strength is quite considerable.”

While speaking, Titania skillfully led her horse in a small half-circle, turning to face everyone in the group. She then addressed them all in a low tone, wary of other ears in the area.

“I believe that you know this after what you’ve seen, but Duke Hadorious is a man you cannot let your guard down around. Reiji-sama, Mizuki, make absolutely certain that you do not do so around him. Luka and Roffrey, I entrust you two to support Reiji-sama and Mizuki.”

In response to Titania’s orders, the two knights immediately saluted.

“And Gregory, you will accompany me as you are.”

“But Your Highness...”

“There is no need to worry. No matter what measures Duke Hadorious has taken against you, I am here. Be at ease.”

“Your Highness... I am in your debt.”

As Titania reassured Gregory, he humbly lowered his head. Standing behind him, Roffrey seemed overcome with emotion and was moved to tears for some reason. Luka beheld the princess with a reverent gaze.

“Tia seems pretty cool today, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“But you can’t fall in love with her, okay?”

“Wh-What?”

Reiji was taken aback by what Mizuki said, but she huffed and

turned away. Luka looked just as confused as Reiji did when Mizuki ran over and hid behind her.

It was just about then a man who appeared to be a soldier came dashing towards the camp from the thick of the forest with several others in tow. It was likely the group of scouts who'd gone to survey the situation. Watching them beeline for Hadorious without stopping until they reached him, Reiji and the others also made their way towards the center of the camp. As they arrived, Hadorious was inquiring what the kneeling scout had to report.

"What is the state of the demons?"

"Y-Your Grace! I come to report that the demon army..."

With sweat still trickling down his face, the soldier took a gasp of air to catch his breath. In the dramatic pause just before he revealed the news, everyone present except for Hadorious gulped. Just how many of them were deployed? What kind of demons were there? Everyone's imagination ran wild with speculation about what his next words would be. But what he said next floored them all.

"W-Was completely annihilated..."

There was a moment of incredulous silence.

"Annihilated, you said?!"

"Ridiculous. The reports said that there should have been more than a thousand of them. And you're telling me they were all annihilated before even colliding with the army?"

Following Reiji's yell, Hadorious's astonished voice rang out too. Reiji couldn't help glancing over. As expected, Hadorious looked shocked. This report had thrown even him for a loop. The camp around them broke out into a mix of bewilderment and doubt. And there, Titania spoke up.

"Are you certain?"

"What? I..."

It seemed the scout had only just noticed her presence. After a short moment of confusion, urged on by Hadorious, he replied in a panicked voice.

"Y-Yes, there's no mistaking it. In the plains beyond here, there was nothing but the corpses of demons and monsters."

"My god..."

With that, a heavy silence fell over the camp. This wasn't bad news, but with the situation what it was, doubt took precedence over any other thoughts. Everyone was confounded at what was appropriate to say at a time like this. After a few moments passed, it seemed that Hadorious had thought of something and he turned to face Titania.

"Your Highness, could it be..."

"...No, we came here from the Nelferian Empire. It's in the

opposite direction of where the demons are located, and even if that were the case, just what reason would we have to put on such a petty drama here?"

"It was a foolish question..."

Hadorious dismissed his own ill-considered inquiry. He must have thought that perhaps Reiji and the others had been the ones to annihilate the demons. As a denizen of this world, even Hadorious believed in the hero and his abilities. Hearing of such grand news, it wasn't all that unreasonable to assume the hero was behind it. Reiji, however, was clueless. And while Hadorious was in the middle of contemplating something, Titania pressed for action.

"Duke Hadorious, for the time being, shall we head over there?"

"Indeed, Your Highness. Let us go."



Before reaching their destination, even Reiji had a feeling that there was something preposterous waiting ahead of them. A choking stench that smelled like a mix of iron and rot assaulted his nose, and an indescribable thickness to the air. Both sensations combined gave Reiji goosebumps.

He couldn't tell if the others felt the same thing, or if they just weren't letting it show. Other than the soldiers who were caught in an unsettled vortex, everybody appeared to be composed. Hadorious was firm as ever, and only Titania's eyes had a slight light of insecurity to them.

Reiji casually lowered his gaze from atop his horse. The water that had collected on the ground from the earlier rainfall, perhaps because of the fading light, would sometimes appear to be red to him. He rubbed his eyes.

And before long, they emerged from the tree line.

"This is..."

Hadorious's gasp hung in the air. As Reiji and the others arrived at the site where the scouts reported the demons were, what came into view was a scene that truly made them doubt their eyes.

"What... is this...?"

What Reiji saw from atop his horse was beyond description. Unable to articulate what he was seeing or feeling, he could only gasp in horror. The scouts had led them towards the foot of the mountain, and they'd come to a relatively level, wide open plain with a clear view. And what they saw there was massive fissures in the ground, earth that had become molten from high temperatures and chilled back into solidified lumps, icebergs that seemed to pierce the skies, some kind of unknown, pitch black swamps, and a countless number of demon and monster corpses.

Now then, exactly what had happened in this place? A bright light shone down from between the gray clouds, illuminating the bizarre scene. No one present had ever witnessed anything like it before. Even with his modern knowledge, Reiji couldn't think of a single natural disaster that would leave this kind of destruction in its wake.

Surely the only word appropriate for this devastation was catastrophe. Listening carefully, Reiji felt like he could hear the lingering screams of the demons. That was just how ghastly this scenery was. Even though the demons were his enemies, he almost felt sorry for them upon seeing what they had suffered through.

This was perhaps the very image of hell. No, it was safe to say a form of hell had happened here.

Guided by the scouts and soldiers and following behind Hadorious, Reiji asked a question to nobody in particular while riding atop his horse.

"This... is a path, isn't it?"

A clearing extended in front of them in a perfectly straight line. Lacking any traces of blood, meat, and the other destruction present in the field, it was visually distinct. It was as if something had cut through this all, determined to press forward without a hint of hesitation. Whatever it was had moved straight ahead towards the forest at the foot of the mountains while paving its way with the corpses of the demons who attacked it from the sides. Taking this all in, Mizuki, who was following behind Reiji, began muttering.

"Traces of magic..."

"Mizuki?"

"Yeah, there's no mistaking it. This is all the aftermath of magic."

Mizuki stated her assessment definitively, not holding back in the slightest because she was convinced of it. Trembling, she turned and pointed towards the unnatural ice formations and fires in the surrounding area. They were the result of magic. After hearing her conclusion, Titania raised a voice of admiration.

"Mizuki, I am surprised you could tell..."

"Yeah, there's only a tiny hint of the remnants of mana, and the ice lumps and fires over there probably still have traces of their spells on them."

"...You're right."

Straining his eyes and sharpening his senses, Reiji could also comprehend that there was something left of the magic that had been used. Even though he couldn't tell before, once it was pointed out to him that there was magic involved, he could suddenly identify it clearly as if a fog in his mind had instantly cleared away.

However, for the embers, ice, and other various creations to still contain details of their respective spells was quite a big deal. The

magical foundation of a spell only took an instant to defeat a demon. So for it to linger in such detail even now...

“Mizuki, isn’t this...?”

“Yeah. The spell that was used is super high-level. I can’t tell what it is at all... It might just be something different from the magic we use.”

“That’s possible, but to use high-level spells this many times is...”

This was beyond unusual. Could it have been a large army that destroyed the demons? Reiji dismissed the idea as soon as it came to mind. If two large armies had clashed, the scenery would be markedly different. There would have to be signs of the other army, including corpses. But there wasn’t a single hint to suggest anything like that. The field they could see stretched all the way to the horizon, and it was uniformly covered with the corpses of demons. Even if a large army had been gathered, it wasn’t even realistically possible for them to have so many high-level mages. Adding the sight of it all up, all Reiji could think was that something—something overwhelming—had passed through here.

The horses, sensitive to the nervousness of humans and the subtleties of the atmosphere around them, were neighing incessantly. While gently soothing the horses who were on edge as they proceeded, Titania was the next one that could be heard gasping.

“This is...?!”

She was aghast. Hadorious finished the thought for her.

“Even a behemoth...?”

Hearing the two of them, Reiji and the others looked over. What they were met with was the corpse of an enormous monster.

“I-It’s huge...”

Mizuki’s voice was trembling in shock. The overall length of the beast was probably over two hundred meters. It called to mind the image of a beached cruiser laying across the hill as if stranded. It had a black, thick hide, bulky wrinkled skin, profound limbs that did not seem to balance out the size of its body, and massive horns.

Its gargantuan and cloudy scarlet eyes were wide open, giving off an eerie feeling. Rather than fear for the monster’s original power, everyone feared what had been able to leave it in such a condition. Even a creature of this prowess had been but cut down, as Mizuki said, by some form of magic. It lay sprawled out at an awkward angle. It appeared half of the beast was buried underground, but in reality, half of its body was just completely missing.

“Th-That is a special class two monster. To think even something like this was defeated...”

Forgetting to even explain the seriousness of such a classification, Titania gave voice to her awe. Otherwise, she stood frozen in place.

Understanding just what this monster was, her shock was on another level. But everyone was shaken. Even the other soldiers, Gregory, and Hadorious all wore serious expressions.

And as everyone was seized with it all, a soldier who had gone ahead to check things out returned with heavy steps. But his gait was not a sign of fatigue. No, the appalling environs just weighed on him that much.

“I... I have a report... As expected, it seems the demons have been completely annihilated. The total count of them was likely...”

All present held their breath waiting for the next words to come from the kneeling soldier’s mouth. But he wasn’t intentionally making them wait. He himself looked too taken aback to account for the number. Hadorious, maintaining his stiff expression, urged the soldier on.

“Just how many were there?”

“Y-Your Grace! It is estimated that they surpassed ten thousand in count, we believe...”

In that instant, all present felt their hearts stop. Ten thousand? That colossal number made them doubt their ears. Silence fell over the field. Not even the sound of breathing could be heard. And then, as people gradually regained their senses, Hadorious spoke up once more, his voice dyed in fright.

“Ten thousand, you say? The destruction here is vast, but I do not believe the number of corpses present supports your claim.”

“With all due respect, Your Grace, the estimate was calculated from the tracks left by the demons and monsters while they were moving, and the scope of the offensive. We do believe it to be accurate.”

Hearing the scout’s words, Hadorious once more spoke with a grim expression.

“To think that it wasn’t just a thousand...”

His voice was filled with so much emotion that he was at a loss as to what to feel. His mind was likely running wild with what would have happened if he’d fought against such forces. No matter how he’d prepared, those numbers were out of the bounds of his imagination. But nevertheless, he seemed to collect himself as Titania turned to him.

“To think that we mistook the scale of the demons. I shudder at the thought of what would have happened if they’d attacked Metel or Kurant City, but...”

“Just who accomplished this and when, you mean? Do you have any clues, Duke Hadorious?”

“As for who, I do not have any idea whatsoever. But seven days ago, there was some most tempestuous lighting in the area. It was

likely the day that the demons were annihilated.”

“A day of lightning...”

“The bishop of the Church of Salvation said that it was because we touched on the anger of the Goddess, but...”

Hadorious sounded as if he thought the whole thing was a tall tale, but these people seemed to regard lightning as the embodiment of heavenly wrath much the same way the people of Earth did.

But was it really the Goddess Alshuna who'd defeated the demons? No, such a divine intervention was out of the question. If such a thing were possible, this world wouldn't need a hero in the first place.

And so the mystery only deepened. They had a rough idea of when it happened, but in the end, they still didn't have any idea what had really gone down. Gripped by that tense, oppressive unknown, Mizuki voiced her worry to Reiji.

“Suimei-kun, was he alright during this?”

“I wonder about that...”

As Mizuki cast her eyes down in anxiety, Reiji's heart went out to her. He was feeling it too. Just where was Suimei now? It would have been nice if the demons were defeated before Suimei had encountered them, but...

“It's demons! There are survivors!”

Hearing that voice coming from behind them, everyone turned around. One of the soldiers that had been investigating the surrounding area announced the presence of demons with practically a scream. Were they mixed in with the corpses? Or did they come flying in from nearby? A number of demons who appeared to be the remnants of the demon forces sprang to the air with violent vigor and were headed towards them. The first one to raise their voice in response was Hadorious.

“They're coming this way! Everyone take up combat positions!”

As he drew his sword from horseback, he commanded the soldiers in the area without hesitation. Hearing his voice, they took action immediately. The soldiers with spears took the front line. Mages fell into line behind them and immediately began casting spells. And following up on all that that, Reiji immediately turned to Luka.

“Luka-san, take care of Mizuki!”

“As you wish.”

“R-Reiji-kun!”

“I'm also going to assist them. Mizuki, wait here with Luka. Tia!”

“Yes, Reiji-sama!”

“Stick behind me and prepare your magic! We're going around with the horses and hitting their flank!”

Yelling out in haste, Reiji drew his sword. He was looking at the

demons and the formation of soldiers preparing to meet them. Deciding a flank attack would be best, Reiji spurred his horse forward. Titania, Gregory, and Roffrey followed after him. And while that was going on, the other soldiers sprang into action at Hadorious's command.

With a shorter path, the soldiers reached the demons first. The ones wielding spears leaped at the demons and kept them in check, and the mages slung spells where the openings appeared. It was a perfectly-regulated tactic carried out in textbook fashion. The skills of each individual soldier were also quite high, and their teamwork was splendid. At this rate, they would completely suppress the demons without any casualties.

No...

Or so it appeared, but the demons were desperate. Their main force had already been annihilated, and they fought with the desperation of dead men. It was something seen on the battlefield from time to time. Even though their fates were ultimately sealed, they were making a last stand to try and exact as much damage as possible. A form of revenge. An act of defiance. They had no place to return to, no place to go but death, but they did not fear it. It emboldened them. Soldiers who had that sort of determination were strong, and difficult to deal with.

Dead men had no regards for their lives and were a dangerous force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. They fought recklessly without regard for their own safety, and it gave them just enough of an edge to break through the soldiers' formation. Wanting to take as many humans as they could with them to the afterlife, the demons were rampaging violently. It was turning into an utter melee, which put the soldiers at a disadvantage.

"Fall back!"

Seeing that, Hadorious spurred on his large black horse and rushed in. While commanding the soldiers, he bisected the demon in front of him with a single swing. However, a number of other demons slipped by him. They were headed right for Luka and Mizuki.

"Crap!"

They had slipped by on the opposite side of the field from Reiji, and by the time he noticed that, it was already too late. The demons flew at an incredible speed, and the distance between them and Mizuki was shrinking rapidly. There were three of them, too. Even if Mizuki fought, she and Luka would still be outnumbered. And if Luka tried to defend Mizuki on her own, it would be even worse.

"Gregory!"

The moment Titania reflexively yelled out, with or without even having heard her, Gregory's horse turned around. However...

“Tch! Mizuki-dono, please grab hold of me tightly.”

“Oh, uh, yeah!”

Maneuvering her horse, Luka tried to escape the descending demons. Unfortunately, however, the horse’s feet were being slowed in the mud, hampering its ability to evade. The disadvantage was only slight, but even that could be the difference between life and death now.

“Shit! Stain Scarlet!”

While cursing, Reiji let loose some of his fire magic. Titania followed up with a spell of her own, but neither would make it in time. The berserking demons moved at superhuman speeds.

This is bad! At this rate...

The demons closed in on Mizuki and Luka. Mizuki fired off her own magic in defense, but the demons continued charging even when scorched with flame. Reiji was much too far away to be able to help and he knew it. A bad premonition crawled down his back in the form of a chill.

And just when he was about to prepare himself for the worst, several white lines in the corner of his eye formed a vortex in and soared through the sky, tearing it apart. It was pure white fire. And it engulfed the demons closing in on Mizuki and Luka in the blink of an eye. In a flash, the white flames scattered into the sky, and just like that, the demons were burned to ashes.

“...Huh?”

“Impossible! This magic is...!”

Reiji and Titania’s voices rang out in surprise and realization. And as they grasped what exactly that white fire was and what it signified, they could hear the sound of hooves trampling across the ground from some distance behind them. Someone was approaching on horseback at an unreal speed. It seemed they’d even cast magic on their horse. They were closing in with the speed of a meteor. And when the person in question came into view, Titania shouted out with joy.

“White Flame-dono!”

Yes, rushing towards them on horseback was the young court mage in a pure white robe who had summoned Reiji and the others to this world, Felmenia Stingray. Reiji then turned towards her and called out as well.

“Sensei?! Why are you here?!”

“Hero-dono! Save the talk for later! The remaining demons come first!”

“R-Right!”

Felmenia brought him to his senses, and Reiji immediately turned his horse around and cut through to the remaining demons. Hadorious also cut down another one from horseback, then began to shout to his

men once more.

“Mages, prepare to fire magic once more!”

His heroic command resounded over the field. Under his orders, the soldiers were able to rally and corner the demons. And with the magic that the mages had prepared, the demons were annihilated. Because multiple magics had all gone off at once, dust, dirt, smoke, and steam were all kicked up into the air, obscuring everyone’s vision. But even so, it was clear there were no longer any remaining demons in the vicinity. Even with compromised visibility, the demons’ presence had been completely eliminated. And so Felmenia dismounted from her horse, and drew closer while leading it along.

“Your Highness, as well as Reiji-dono and Mizuki-dono... It is good to see you all again.”

Titania gave a satisfied nod, and Reiji and Mizuki returned Felmenia’s greeting.

“It’s good to see you again, Sensei.”

“Felmenia-san, thank you so very much. You saved me.”

“I’m grateful I just happened to be passing by.”

Saying that, Felmenia gently caressed Mizuki’s hand. Mizuki gave her a bright, endearing, and grateful smile. Felmenia then turned towards Hadorious, and after exchanging a few scarce words with him as well, she bowed her head. They seemed to be acquainted. Though she displayed neither affection nor the disgust that Titania had shown, she finished her greetings with him in a businesslike manner. She then turned to Titania again, who offered her gratitude.

“White Flame-dono, I thank you greatly for your assistance. But whatever are you doing here?”

“That’s right. If I am not mistaken, were you not relieved of your post as a court mage by His Majesty?”

When Hadorious added himself into the conversation, Felmenia pointed a meek expression back to him.

“Your Grace, currently in lieu of my duties as a court mage, I am performing a special duty at His Majesty’s behest.”

“A royal command, is it...?”

Reiji was surprised to hear she was no longer serving as a court mage. But if King Almadious had given her an order, then...

“Could it be you came to help us?”

“What? Oh, no, I’m afraid that’s not the case...”

“Then what is it?”

“Um, that is to say... there are certain unavoidable circumstances, so...”

“White Flame-dono, what is the matter?”

Titania urged her on, but Felmenia was hesitating to speak like it was difficult to do so. She was inexplicably on edge. Reiji couldn’t tell

what was wrong with her. Was her royal command something that was hard to speak of in front of the princess? Well, if the order had come from the king himself, then that was completely possible.

And while they were in the midst of trying to get to the bottom of Felmenia's appearance, a single soldier came running over while panting.

"R-Reporting!"

Were there still demons in the area? That didn't seem likely. A soldier who arrived to deliver a report had come from the forest they'd all just emerged from. There were no demons that way. And so, Hadorious questioned the soldier.

"What is it?"

"F-From the Empire! Her Imperial Highness Third Princess Graziella Filas Rieseld is leading a single company and broke through the border!"

It was a notice of an emergency. Despite gasping for air, the soldier managed to deliver his report. In response, Titania's expression suddenly changed to one of utter shock.

"Wha?! Her Imperial Highness Graziella?!"

"Yes, Your Highness! Her Imperial Highness ignored the stationed troops who tried to stop her and forcefully broke through Astel's border. She has already passed Kurant City, and is headed this way at a terrifying pace!"

"No way... Why?"

"...I do believe that much is self-evident, Twilight-dono."

At that point in the conversation, an unfamiliar voice cut in. Titania turned around in surprise. Just beyond the dust and smoke that had finally started to clear, a woman appeared.



"Reiji-kun! Another unknown person popped up! What do we do?!"

"Yeah, I don't know that this is something we can do anything about..."

The two of them were likely powerless in this situation. Mizuki was clearly alarmed, and Reiji tried to calm her down.

Before their eyes was a woman straddled atop a horse. She spoke with a voice that implied it was meaningless to challenge her. The clearing smoke revealed she was wearing a luxurious military uniform and a coat draped over her shoulders. With wavy, long, blonde hair and a fearless smile on her face, she naturally looked like she was born to reign over others. She simply gave off that kind of commanding air. This woman, along with her comrades or subordinates, were all dressed in similar uniforms. However, what was

concerning was...

“They’re riding horses, but nobody noticed them coming...?”

Just like Reiji’s group, this woman and her comrades were riding horses. There was no denying that, but not one person had heard the sound of approaching hooves. With so many of them and at this distance, it should have been obvious. Yet no one had heard a thing. That should have been absolutely impossible. And perhaps because she heard Reiji mutter such doubts to himself, Felmenia provided him with the answer.

“Reiji-dono, this woman is the Nelferian Empire’s third imperial princess, Her Highness Graziella Filas Rieseld. Her Highness is also known as the Geo Malifex, the strongest mage who uses the earth attribute, throughout the Empire. Something like disguising the sound of horses running is likely but a trifle to her.”

“But why do that?”

“That much, I do not know. Based on the situation, it does not appear that their purpose is to harm us, but...”

Both Reiji and Felmenia knitted their brows over Graziella’s arrival. As they watched, Titania drew nearer to Graziella with a still stern expression on her face.

“It has been a long time, Your Imperial Highness.”

“A long time indeed, Your Royal Highness. It’s good that you appear to be in good health.”

Even while both girls sounded angry, Titania stayed polite. And in contrast, Graziella maintained her commanding attitude. Somewhat incited by that, Titania grew a bit critical.

“You said your reason for being here was self-evident, Your Highness, but don’t you have something to say for yourself?”

“Oh? Something to say? I don’t have the slightest clue. Is there something I should?”

“Tch... Even if we are allied nations, to cross the national border without any notice, much less with armed forces, is quite an offense, is it not? Do you have some sort of explanation for your aberrant behavior?”

Graziella met Titania’s stern gaze with laughter.

“Certainly it would ordinarily warrant an apology, but do you have any room to talk?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I do not believe the matter is so complicated that you cannot understand without me saying it.”

The gazes of the imperial and royal princesses clashed. After a few tense moments, Graziella scoffed at her.

“A large army of demons appeared within your territory, you know? And considering your obligation to worry about the damage

that could be done to adjacent territories, to not even offer a single word of warning to us, your neighbors... And you call yourself an allied country?"

"That's... The advance of the demons was too fast. We simply hadn't been able to communicate the information yet."

"Is that so? Your preparations against the demons seem to be quite in order. And you and Astel's hero are supposed to be in our country, are you not? Yet you're spouting excuses about not being able to inform us. My, the Kingdom of Astel's dear princess dons quite the mask, I see."

"Urgh..."

Titania grimaced as if she found all this mortifying. As if seeing that improved her mood, Graziella laughed scornfully in delight.

"And that's all not to mention that you were in our country on your way to defeating the Demon Lord. You should've had no way to hear news of home, so I wonder..."

"You'll ask us to stay quiet on this matter. However, Your Highness, there is no justifiable reason for you to enter our country without notice like this."

"We came running over to provide reinforcements upon hearing of the crisis in an allied nation. Under such circumstances, is that not a justifiable reason? I won't let you say this kind of thing is unheard of."

Graziella spoke in an even more oppressive way than before. She flatly claimed that they had approached unnoticed to provide reinforcements in the battle against the demons. Judging from the situation, that was likely the case. But Titania was still unhappy. With a bitter look on her face, she glared at Graziella.

"We will be formally protesting this matter at a later date."

"Do as you like. However, as long as this matter involves the invasion of demons, I do believe the Saadias Alliance and the Holy State would all be in our side."

Graziella made that bold declaration as if the matter hardly concerned her. She brazenly ignored Titania's threat altogether. Graziella then turned towards Reiji. Her oppressive gaze, which felt like it pierced right through him, inspected him from head to toe.

"Are you the summoned hero of Astel?"

"Yes."

"My, how unsociable."

"That's just my nature."

Saying that, Reiji lightly bowed his head. This was an opponent he couldn't give any opportunity. He felt that intuitively, and so he kept things curt. Graziella laughed dryly like it wasn't all that amusing, and then peered at Reiji.

"You have quite the pretty face, I see."

“What of it?”

“Nothing. It’s just that I don’t see even a single scar. I was merely thinking that perhaps you had nothing to do with violence back in your own world, you see. For a man who was summoned as a hero, that’s something of a disappointment.”

Despite just meeting him for the first time, that was what she had to say. Was she just that bold? She was vicious, near villainous. Titania upbraided her for it.

“Your Imperial Highness, is that not going too far when speaking to the hero who will save the world?”

“Hmph. All I did was speak my mind. Besides, I do not believe this disastrous scene was authored solely by your hands.”

Putting all else aside, Graziella glared at Titania and asked about the real matter at hand.

“So, there were demons, right? What happened here?”

“Indeed. Just what happened here, I wonder? I also do not know.”

“Hmm?”

In response to Titania’s blunt answer, Graziella furrowed her brow. Even they didn’t know. Trying to explain the unknown was pointless, and with Titania’s personal feelings thrown in the mix, she didn’t want to tell her anything anyway. As expected, she hated to lose.

And while that was going on, Reiji got curious and took a peek at Hadorious. Just why was he staying quiet after it had gone this far? Judging from his character and position, he would try to get in a word or two with Graziella. Yet he hadn’t offered a peep of protest. He’d been far too quiet ever since Graziella showed up.

Did Reiji have the wrong idea about him after all? No, no matter how he looked at it, something felt weird. As Reiji was stewing on that skepticism, an irregularity suddenly swooped down on the group. Noticing a wave of power, everyone present began looking around. That surging wave was a mass of aggressive mana. Felmenia was the first to look up over the horizon.

“That is...”

It seemed she’d determined its origin before anyone else. Her long silver hair fluttered in the breeze as she glared at what was flying in at an outrageous speed. Next to her, Hadorious finally spoke up.

“So there were still some remnants. However...”

“It’s stronger than the demons from before.”

The one who followed up after him was Reiji. Sensing the danger of the current situation, he put himself on guard. The mana being let off by the incoming demon was serious. It couldn’t even be compared to the demons he’d fought before. And this powerful demon was headed straight for them. Just like the others before it, the moment it

found humans, it went after them like they were a discovery that needed to be exterminated.

Everyone saw it now. Felt it. There was no need for anyone to announce its presence. Before long, it dropped to the earth like a bolt of lightning, and a loud boom erupted in front of Reiji and the others. A cloud of brown dust scattered in all directions. It rolled over the area like a fog, obscuring everyone's vision again. The wave of mana that washed over them was like a driving rain.

And before long, what came into view through the dust was an enormous demon that surpassed two meters in height. It had a big frame, rust-colored skin, and thick limbs. It was a devilish creature whose very design seemed to suggest that power was everything.

"You damn humans... You already gathered your forces?"

"It's huge..."

As that enormous frame glared over the group, someone muttered and gulped, remarking about the demon's size. Another trembling voice then spoke up.

"Reiji-sama, be careful!"

"Yeah, I know, Tia."

With Titania imploring him to keep vigilant, Reiji squinted as he observed the demon closely. While it was flying in, he'd sensed extraordinary power, but seeing it up close, the demon's entire body was battered. He was wounded all over, and his injuries seemed to be leaking a faint, black, smoke-like aura. There was little energy in the demon's movements. It was plain to see that it was completely exhausted.

To put it in words, it was a mere shell of itself. It was like it had just finished a fierce battle. No, there was no mistaking that's what had happened. This demon likely had fought in the battle that had taken place in this field. That's why it was weakened. However, even so, the amount of mana and the fighting spirit it still let out were enough to make it a sufficiently formidable opponent for Reiji and the others as they were now. The first one to address the enormous demon was Hadorious.

"Bastard, you're no mere normal demon, are you?"

"That's right... I am Rajas, one of the demon generals of the demon army..."

Hearing Rajas identify himself, Titania and Graziella both voiced their surprise in their own way.

"A demon general, you say...?!"

"I see. So you're not just all size, it seems."

As the soldiers began to stir and whisper, Hadorious once more addressed the demon while vigilantly keeping an eye on him.

"It seems that you have been done in quite considerably. What did

you bastards fight here?"

"Shut up. That has nothing to do with you..."

Rajas cut down Hadorious's question as if it was simply annoying. In addition to the pain and anguish in his voice, there was a distinguishable tone of indignation. But even as he spoke, Rajas prepared himself for battle. He seemed intent on attacking. Everyone present steeled themselves as well, having already drawn their weapons. Reiji, however, took a somewhat different approach. Face to face with a demon general for the first time, there was something he wanted to know.

"I have something I want to ask."

"And what's that, puny human?"

"Why do all of you attack humans?"

Yes, he wanted to know the reason demons attacked humans. He wanted to know why. Rajas's face twisted with a puzzled expression, and then he spat his answer.

"Hmph. Isn't that obvious? The order that you bastards create is an eyesore. That's why we'll kill you humans and hunt you down to the last."

"Order? Saying such a thing is an eyesore... You can't just accept that we live differently?"

"No. You damn humans endlessly crop up and spread out like maggots. And when you all act together to do something, there's nothing more irritating than that to us. That's why you must be exterminated."

"But aren't humans and demons both living beings all the same? What meaning is there in killing each other for such a reason?"

"Meaning?"

"That's right."

What he was really getting at was the right and wrong of the conflict. Reiji had no intention of just glossing over that. The idea that conflict was avoidable as long as two people could talk to and understand each other was a fool's dream. Reiji had seen that fail time and time again in his own world.

But as long as there wasn't a reason that two people were doomed to fight no matter what, he believed that peace was the better way. He didn't expect enemies to hold hands, but as long as they could mutually coexist without bothering each other, that would be good enough.

Reiji could hear Titania fretting and an exasperated sigh from Graziella, who was likely looking down on him. But no matter what they thought, he wanted his answer. Rajas then turned a suspicious gaze on him.

"Could it be... you're the damn hero?"

“And what if I am?”

“Heh... Heh heh, I see... I thought that might be the case when you started spouting such pretentious and naive crap, but how convenient. With this, I can accomplish my original goal.”

Despite being unable to hide his exhausted state, Rajas stoutheartedly declared his intent to make a move. And seeing Rajas like that, perhaps in ridicule, Graziella let out an astonished laugh.

“What’s that, demon? What about those injuries of yours, hmm?”

“Like I care. In any case, there’s no way I can shamelessly return like this. To wipe away the disgrace of my failure, Hero, I’ll be taking your damn head! I won’t lose to a mere human ever again!”

After unleashing an angry roar, Rajas once more began building up his fighting spirit and mana. Reiji turned his sword on him. Hadorious did the same, and the soldiers took up battle formations. Mizuki stepped to the back, and Titania began readying her magic from the rear line. Perhaps intending on working with her, Felmenia took her place next to Titania.

Meanwhile, seemingly intent on just observing, Graziella simply sat atop her horse with folded arms. She wasn’t moving a muscle, much less preparing for a fight. Perhaps because she was accustomed to the sight of battle, her arrogant atmosphere did not crumble in the slightest.

“Hey, answer my—”

“I’m done with you and your damn questions, Hero!”

Rajas began to move. His towering frame closed in on Reiji with nimble movements. He was moving at such a dreadful speed that the wind howled around him.

“Hup!”

Matching up his speed, Reiji leaped into the air. With strength unimaginable in his world, he rose up above Rajas, and then swung his sword as he came down.

“HAAAAA!”

With a battle cry, he brought his blade down on Rajas’s fist. Enduring the tingling shock that passed into his hand through the sword, Reiji poured all his strength into his grip. To think that a single fist was enough to rival a blow from both arms of a hero powered with the divine protection of the hero summoning... If this was the demon in his exhausted state, then just how powerful was he when he was in perfect shape?

While Reiji was still hanging in the air, Rajas used his other hand to swing at him from the side. Judging that he’d take the hit in his current position, Reiji relented on the strength he was pouring into the sword and lowered his body to the ground as he landed. Changing the trajectory of his hearty slap, however, Rajas brought his hand

downward towards Reiji's head.

Reiji didn't see it coming. There was no time. That he noticed it at all was entirely due to the intuition born of his unnaturally sharpened senses. Reiji went face down low to the ground, grabbed the earth with one hand, and, leaving it to the strength in his arm, forcefully chucked his body to the side. The hand that impacted the ground sent mud flying into the air as he moved. So that it wouldn't get into his eyes, Reiji covered his face using the flat of his blade. Recovered and back on his feet mere moments later, Reiji stepped forward to strike with his sword. When he did, Rajas vigorously drove his foot into the earth.

"Uwah!"

The powerful shock wave shook the earth. Because it happened just as Reiji stepped forward to attack, his balance was compromised. And then an enormous ramming attack that could be mistaken for heavy machinery came rushing at him.

Reiji judged that he wouldn't be able to evade in time. So instead of pointlessly trying to dodge, he held out his sword like a shield and braced all the muscles in his body, resigning himself to the collision. Sent flying by the impact, he had a vision of his entire body breaking to pieces as he landed. When he did hit the ground, he was assaulted by a numbing pain that ran screaming throughout his body. If not for the divine protection of the hero summoning, he easily would've been reduced to a pulp.

Rajas had taken Reiji out so quickly that there wasn't even an opening for anyone else to offer support. And eventually, when his senses and the regular passage of time returned to him, Reiji could hear Mizuki screaming.

"R-Reiji-kun!"

"...I'm alright, Mizuki. Don't worry..."

An odd numbness was still lurking all over his body, but he endured it and stood up. When he did, Rajas yelled out angrily.

"Is this the power of a hero?! Are you saying that *this* is what threatens the ambitions of us demons?! Even for all your silly human delusions, there's a limit to impertinence! How dare you think you could defeat us with this level of strength?!"

His shouting voice was colored with frustration and disappointment. What spurred him to say those things? It was like he was comparing Reiji to someone else. As Rajas moved to attack Reiji once more, Hadorious stood in his way.

"Get out of my way!"

Rajas let out a tremendously loud shout that threatened to deafen all who heard it, yet Hadorious remained silent as he confronted him. And while evading the fist that came down like a cannonball,

Hadorious trifled with Rajas. The way he was conducting himself was forceful and clever, to the point that any observer would question his age. And when he found an opening, Hadorious drove his sword unerringly into the large wound on Rajas's chest.

"G-Guh!"

"Hmph..."

Having his wound so gouged, Rajas grimaced slightly. Seeing him do so, however, Hadorious didn't seem all that amused. Scoffing at him like it was boring, Hadorious only looked down on him with a dismissive glance that suggested it was useless to challenge him. To be able to cut into such a robust demon like that, he must have been considerably strong.

"Tch! A mere human—"

Rajas flung his arm grandly to the side as if swatting away a fly. However, Hadorious lithely leaped back and safely evaded the blow while distancing himself from Rajas.

"Move."

A stern voice called out to Hadorious. Surprisingly, the one to make a move as he backed off was Graziella. Had she just remained quiet until now so she could wait for a good opportunity? While dashing across the earth, she wove together a magic spell.

"Oh Earth! Thou art the crystallization of my tyranny! Take hold of unyielding power and smash my foes to pieces! Become a monument that shall extol glorious death! Crystal Raid!"

Firing both her chant and keyword at Rajas, Graziella bashed the earth at her feet. In an instant, the ground around her was smashed to pieces as if a localized earthquake had occurred, and a countless number of rocks protruded upwards. It was as if quartz or gypsum shot out of the ground, and immediately following Rajas's grand swing at Hadorious, all of the giant, elongated rocks rushed at the demon.

It was magic that sharpened the peaks of the rocks into points, accelerated them like cannonballs, and granted them hardness and heft. And just as the stones were about to slam into Rajas, the split second before they could, a black aura coiled around Rajas's body as if adhering to it.

The demon general was buried under the multitude of rock pillars. But it only lasted a few moments. He punched and tore through them, shattering them all. Rajas remained as he was, apparently not any worse for wear.

"My, for it to be ineffective."

Was that black aura that he draped around himself Rajas's defensive technique? After the aura was dispersed, there were no signs of any new wounds on his massive frame. The spell Graziella had cast was above the intermediate level, so for such powerful magic to have

no effect whatsoever demonstrated the abnormality of his resilience. Graziella was surprised, but she didn't show the tiniest amount of panic. And just then...

“OOOOOOOOH!”

Rajas let out a war cry. It was like he was trying to forcefully pull power from the depths of his body, a roar which seemed to chip away at his own life. And before long, a black energy began swelling in Rajas's right hand. It exploded as it swallowed everything in the area. A shock wave of black energy was closing in like the surging sea.

Crap...!

Eyeing the distance between himself and Rajas, Reiji was left with a bitter taste in his mouth. The ten meters between them was far too close. He'd be seriously wounded or worse at this range, but Reiji's body was still numb. He couldn't move. His defensive magic wouldn't make it in time either.

A sensation like the cold chill of going pale mixed with the burning heat of impatience assaulted his numb arm. Just as he clenched his jaw and prepared to take the hit with no defenses up whatsoever, Reiji's body was swept away by something.

“Reiji-sama! Thank goodness!”

“What? Tia...?”

The voice that called out to him was coming from incredibly nearby. He then realized that in the blink of an eye, the scenery around him had changed. The voice was Titania's, and she appeared to be holding on to him.

Reiji organized his thoughts based on the information he had. While he was immobile, did she sweep him away out of the attack's range? Looking once more, he tried to gauge the distance between himself and Rajas. Did she use magic? They'd escaped by a hair's breadth.

“Fuck... For my full power to only do this much, just what the hell was that lightning...?”

Rajas was gasping for breath. Seemingly unable to stop the wheezing in his lungs, the voice coming out of him was somewhat hoarse. He used it to curse something, but it was unclear what. Rather than bitter, it sounded like he was annoyed, and rather than yield to the pain in his body, his anger took precedence.

Next, Reiji could sense mana in the surroundings swelling up. Following that, the presence of magic expanded, and the mages in the area all fired at once. Rajas was immediately engulfed by spells of various magics. He was hit with flames, lightning, and other attributes that would not negate each other when used together. And because so many powerful mages fired at once, their total destructive power surpassed that of Graziella's magic.

However, even so, Rajas was still going strong. The spells hardly fazed him. Seeing this unfold before her very eyes, Titania raised a frightened voice.

“What a tenacious demon...”

Just how strong was his body? After all this, the only one who’d been able to deal him any damage was Hadorious. Yet even now, Rajas was groaning in pain. He’d likely been fighting with a fatal wound from the outset. Reiji could only see him as getting closer and closer to death.

“Do not falter! Continue firing magic!”

The soldiers all rallied at Hadorious’s command.



“Everyone...”

While Reiji and the others were fighting with Rajas, the only one left to grit her teeth on the sidelines was Mizuki.

Before a demon that was so powerful it shattered the earth, Reiji, Titania, the noble who ensnared Suimei, and even the imperial princess who suddenly appeared were all fighting. Mizuki was the only one who’d retreated to be protected by a knight. All she could do was watch as the battle unfolded. That was the reality of the situation. While clinging to the knight’s back, she could only huddle up in fear. And to her, that was more bitter than anything else.

Even though her friend was risking his life, she was frozen in place. That tortured her heart. Back when she was in danger, both Reiji and Suimei came to save her. Though it was something that had happened in their own world, it only added to her pangs of conscience and weighed on her heart more.

And despite that, I’m not doing anything...

When she heard Suimei was in danger, she couldn’t move and only trembled. And now that Reiji and the others were engaged in a difficult battle, she simply clung to Luka’s back. She was just waiting for it to be over.

Would she be like this forever? Even though she wanted to be helpful to her friend, to the person who was important to her, would she forever be helpless? Forever need to be protected? Right now, even though that boy was pushed into a hard fight with that large demon right in front of her, was she really going to continue to sit there and do nothing? Such thoughts within her only grew more and more turbulent.

No... I can’t... I can’t be like that...

It would be denying her own words and abandoning her responsibility. Moreover, it meant she’d be willingly giving up her place next to Reiji.

The girl who'd followed along with them, Astel's Princess Titania, firmly stood on the battlefield. Not just for herself, but also for Mizuki and countless people whose faces she didn't even know. And even though she was fighting for all of them...

Is there something...? Something that I can do...?

That's why she had to do something. She knew she had to. If she continued to do nothing as she was, she would indeed stay this way forever. She would just be helpless. Someone that no one needed. The rights and wrongs of her saying she wanted to be of use didn't matter. She just tried to think about what she could do with her own strength.

So... what was it that she could do? It had to be magic. The only thing that she'd learned ever since coming to this world was magic. It was the only thing she had to put to use on the battlefield. But knowing magic alone wouldn't do it. She needed something that surpassed Graziella's magic. Something more powerful. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to defeat that enormous demon.

The magic that I can use is...

"Oh icy hell that brings demise to all fire's breath..."

"Ah..."

It suddenly dawned on her. A clear image and words. A voice she'd never heard before rang in her head, and transformed her intuition into conviction. This magic could defeat him. She wondered why it had happened now, but deep down, she also knew why. Previously, Titania and Felmenia had said that sometimes magic would come into someone's head out of nowhere. When Reiji first used magic, he'd said something similar happened. Then this was likely what they were talking about.

That meant there was no reason that she shouldn't be able to put it to use. All that was left was summoning the courage to actually do it. And before she knew it, she'd leaped off Luka's horse.

"M-Mizuki-dono?! Y-You can't!"

"Mizuki?!"

Reiji and Luka realized that she was walking into danger and called out to try and stop her. But even then, there was no way that she would. For her own sake, for the sake of being beside him, and for the sake of her other friend, she walked forward. Right in the middle of the battlefield. She looked at Rajas's back. Since he was facing off against the soldiers, he hadn't noticed her. At this rate, she could get him completely defenseless...

"What is this...? You damned little girl."

"U-Uh, ah..."

Before she could fire, Rajas turned around. When he fixed his gaze on her, some cold sensation froze her body. She was no longer able to move even a single finger. Was everyone on the battlefield dealing

with this? Just how did they fight against it? How could they muster any resistance to this that wasn't utterly in vain?

"What are you doing?! Mizuki, fall back!"

"Hmph, so a mere stupid little girl nonchalantly dares to present herself to me, huh?"

Titania and Rajas's voices scattered within her head and ran rampant. She couldn't even tell what they'd said. All she could focus on was Rajas's enormous arm. Just by being lightly touched with that, her body would likely be smashed to pieces. The thought of being hit with that battering ram of an arm and what it would do to her filled her entire brain to capacity. She couldn't move.

It was no good after all. With all she'd felt, she couldn't muster up the courage now when it mattered most.

"A hindrance."

What came down on her were cold words with no consideration. Unpleasant words. The same cruel arrogance someone would treat a pest with.

"Stay... back..."

All she could barely get out was a tiny squeak. He couldn't hear it, and even if he had, he wouldn't have listened. At this rate—

"G-GUAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

While Mizuki was trembling before his oppressive aura, Rajas took a single step forward and suddenly began screaming in pain. His anguished cry seemed like it could pierce the heavens. He writhed, grabbing at his chest... Or was it more than that? It was as if something was rampaging within his body. And eventually, from the open portions of Rajas's wound, blue lightning sprouted out, undulating like snakes.

"Urgh, ah—GAAAH! Do you still... still intend on tormenting me, you bastard?!"

Were the curses he spat out directed at the lightning, or towards something else entirely? Who or what he was screaming at was uncertain, but even as he unleashed his rage, the pale lightning continued eating away at the inside of Rajas's body like a hungry snake. The crackling of lightning filled the air. The sharp sound like that of sparks shooting out of an exposed electrical line squirming around assaulted her ears. And mixed within that, there was the faint sound of some inhuman and shrill voice. Rajas was unable to do anything.

The one to make a move next was Reiji.

He couldn't let this chance slip away. Before Rajas was able to move again, he had to defeat him. His body seemed to be in working order again. Slipping out of Titania's arms, he closed in on Rajas in an instant. Before Mizuki knew it, Reiji's body was wreathed in fire,

which meant he had put to use his body reinforcement magic. Rajas swung out his arm to defend himself, but seized by the lightning, it was slow. The blade of Reiji's orichalcum sword came sailing towards him in a downward slash with a good tailwind. It easily repelled Rajas's massive arm.

"HAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Reiji's battle cry shook the air. He drove his orichalcum blade into Rajas's chest.

"Guh... Ah... Ridiculous... From this, this kind of..."

He was astonished like he couldn't believe something as insignificant as Reiji's attack was the finishing blow. It was like a small needle that he'd paid no attention to had pierced his heart. Reiji, meanwhile, was silent. Without letting up on the blade, he only pushed on it harder. And little by little, the point sunk farther into Rajas's body. And eventually, perhaps repelled by the lightning, Reiji let go of his sword and stepped back.

"Gu-uuuuh... If only... if only that man didn't exist, I wouldn't have fallen to the damned likes of you."

"Who? The one who created this disastrous scene?"

"That's right! Using some strange magic, he annihilated my army all on his own. A man dressed in black... If not... If not for that fucker, I would never... to the likes of you!"

With the last of his strength, Rajas ranted and raved. Because of Reiji's sword and the lightning, instead of running wild, he seemed intent on just leaving behind curses. Somewhat unexpectedly, Felmenia then approached the demon.

"What is it... a woman?"

In response to the beautiful mage that approached him at such a leisurely pace that she looked out of place, Rajas spat out a puzzled question while wheezing.

"Demon, there is one thing that I would like to hear from a bastard like you."

"To hear... from me?"

"About the person you spoke of just now, the man in black clothes..."

"What...?"

Rajas made a dubious expression as cold sweat poured down his face. And after closing her eyes for a short moment as if she was pondering in hesitation, Felmenia asked her question.

"Demon, this man dressed in black... Did he perhaps call himself a magician?"

"Woman, do you know that fucker?! YOU
BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAARD!"

The way Rajas lost his composure upon hearing her question was

clearly abnormal. It was like the roar of the beast holding deep resentment for an abominable adversary.

And before long, finding it difficult to even curse out anymore, his shouting came to a stop. Felmenia's amber eyes seemed to be reflecting some kind of admiration, and she muttered to herself in a somewhat convinced manner.

"I see, so it was him after all."

"Answer me, woman... Just what... What is..."

"He called himself a magician, did he not? In that case, there is nothing more for me to tell you."

"I-If only that man didn't exist... I... I would never lose... to such small fries..."

That much was true. The demon known as Rajas was that much of a formidable enemy. He far surpassed their powers. If not for the exhaustion from a precious battle and for the pale lightning that was eating away at him like worms, they likely wouldn't have attained victory. Before Rajas's towering body and his violent strength, they may just have suffered a crushing defeat.

And before long, as if the pale lightning was overflowing from within his body, Rajas began to shine brightly with a pale blue light. He screamed out somebody's name, but the words were swallowed up by the terrifying splashes of electricity. He fell over. His body had reached its limit and could no longer withstand that powerful energy. With a loud sound like a clap of thunder, his body disappeared.

And as if announcing the end of the battle, the clang of Reiji's orichalcum sword—now scorched by lightning—rang out.



"Mizuki!"

After Rajas was burned to nothing by the lightning and vanished, Titania screamed out Mizuki's name as she ran over to her. Still completely dumbfounded, Mizuki feebly sank to the ground and didn't move. She didn't move at all. That was how affected she'd been by the poison that was Rajas's fearsome presence in battle. The trembling of her hands that were loosely hanging at her sides demonstrated that the remains of the fear still shook her heart. Reiji also drew closer to her, and asked her about her sudden and baffling behavior.

"Mizuki! Why did you do something so reckless...?"

"Sorry... I was always just watching. It was only me... That's why I wanted to do something no matter what, so..."

Mizuki lifted her pale face and looked at Reiji as she spoke of the reason why she had been so foolhardy. Then looking down at her trembling hands, it was like she was reminded of it all over again. To meet her gaze, Titania knelt down in front of her.

“Even so, if anything had gone wrong, you would have been killed by that demon called Rajas.”

“A spell popped up in my head... So I thought maybe I could do something about that big demon. That’s why...”

That’s why she’d done what she had. And Mizuki apologized for it again to both of them. In response, Reiji once more let out words of relief as he held her tightly.

“It’s great that you’re alright...”

“Yeah...”

Eventually, Hadorious finished recomposing the ranks of his troops and sent out patrols into the surroundings. Back at the scene of the battle, Titania called out to Felmenia.

“White Flame-dono, there is something that I would like to ask you. Would that be alright?”

Hearing Titania’s polite request, Felmenia nodded. Everyone present could guess what it was about, and waited with bated breath to hear Titania’s question.

“White Flame-dono, about what you had asked Rajas earlier... Are you acquainted with the person who created this situation and wounded that demon?”

Felmenia quietly acknowledged her suspicions, and admitted what everyone present had suspected.

“And so, about this man... What kind of man is he? What is his name?”

Graziella suddenly stepped forward and questioned her next. Was she interested? No, there was no way she wasn’t. She had impatiently cut into their conversation in her bullish manner, but the sullen look on Felmenia’s face said she would never tell.

“My apologies, but I cannot answer that question.”

“...What did you say?”

“This is highly classified information of our country. I cannot provide the answer to Your Imperial Highness of another nation.”

“That demon who called himself Rajas said this man you’re acquainted with annihilated an army of this scale, you know? Even an idiot would know that this is a serious matter. And are you saying you would refuse to answer even then, you twit?”

Even when Felmenia said she couldn’t answer, Graziella didn’t back off. She was even firing off her irritation from deep within her belly in the form of mana and hostility to try and pressure her. A tense, unreasonable atmosphere swept over the area. It felt like it would swallow anyone who lost their focus for a mere second. Graziella was demanding an explanation without a hint of leniency or modesty. Yet even so, Felmenia remained obstinate.

“Yes, Your Highness. No matter how serious a matter it is, highly

classified information is highly classified information. Even if you are of an allied nation, and regardless of mutually sharing all information regarding the demons, I do not possess the authority to speak of this matter.”

Her face was so strained that Graziella’s brow spasmed. It seemed like a fight might break out at any moment, but after clicking her tongue in annoyance, she managed to calm herself down. Felmenia went as far to say that it was a highly confidential matter to her country. Her inquiring further was likely not something Titania and Hadorious would allow as authorities of their nation. If she were to start a fight just because Felmenia wouldn’t fold, that in and of itself would be a serious matter.

Once Graziella seemed to relent, Titania asked a question of her own.

“Regarding that matter, does that also include me?”

“With all due respect.”

Felmenia respectfully bowed her head. Following all this, Hadorious stepped forward.

“Lady Stingray, if you cannot even answer to Her Highness Titania, then does that mean this concerns your royal command from His Majesty the King?”

“Regarding that matter, it is not something that I am able to provide an answer for.”

“I see...”

The fact that she didn’t deny it was like implicitly acknowledging it. However, just what did it mean that she knew who this strange, powerful man was? Reiji knit his brow dubiously. There wasn’t supposed to be anybody that strong in the Kingdom of Astel, or so he thought. It may be that he just didn’t know about them. But if even Titania and Hadorious didn’t know, something felt off. As Reiji turned this all over in his head, Hadorious seemed to do the same thing. Eventually, however, he made an unexpected suggestion.

“Then, about the matter of this demon and its army... There would be no problem in saying that Hero-dono subdued them all, correct?”

“Wha—?!”

Naturally, the first one to react was the hero himself, Reiji. As if he found Reiji’s shock to be somewhat mysterious, however, Hadorious questioned him in return.

“What are you acting so surprised for?”

“I-Isn’t that obvious? I didn’t do it.”

“Certainly, but if we make this out to be the hero’s victory, you do know what benefits it will reap for us, don’t you?”

“That’s...”

At that point, Reiji hesitated to object. Graziella was the one that

raised an objection now.

“Duke, do you believe that I would allow such a thing? We were also here and fought with the demons too, you know.”

Graziella knew the truth, and she wasn't about to let Reiji take this achievement solely for himself. But as if he'd had an answer prepared in advance, Hadorious courteously spoke to her without hesitation.

“Your Imperial Highness Graziella, if you are to let this matter slide, I shall promise that we will not lodge a protest concerning Your Highness's invasion.”

“My invasion, you say?”

“Indeed. Your Highness brought an army across the border without permission, after all.”

“You bastard...”

“For Your Highness, it would be problematic to have bad rumors spread right now. I do believe this is a good deal. All you have to do is pretend that you saw nothing here today.”

“...Do as you like...”

In response to Hadorious's superficially polite offer, Graziella turned around in ill humor. It seemed that Titania also had thoughts about this matter of achievements, and was pointing a surprised and suspicious gaze at Hadorious. However, as if to suggest that it wasn't something that concerned him, Hadorious began giving out instructions to his subordinates.

Chapter 2: The Goddess Is Super Strict With Her

The imperial capital of Filas Philia. As the largest city within the Nelferian Empire, it was home to all kinds of wonders. There was the crystal statue of the Goddess in front of the famous Filas Philia Cathedral and the Imperial University Library, which prided itself on having the largest book collection between the three allied countries. There was also the Magic Institute, which was built in collaboration with the Kingdom of Astel and the Saadias Alliance, which was a think tank for all kinds of magic research. The city itself existed on a grand scale, and was in contention for the title of second largest in the entire world.

The outer edges of the city were predominantly wooden and ashen brick dwellings, but the vast majority of the city streets were lined with residences using a gentle shade of red bricks. And when it came to the upper class district where the nobles lived, the buildings uniformly used high quality, vivid red bricks.

Red was apparently the color of choice in building materials and many other things because the emperor from five generations ago extolled it. It was likely just a matter of personal preference, but in Suimei's world, red—chiefly in Europe—was used to signify the flowing blood of saints, and had been treasured since ancient times. It was also commonly used for the tabards of knights and soldiers as something of an ode to battle. So for this world, especially a militaristic country like Nelferia, to be using the color so prominently was quite the amusing coincidence.

While thinking of such things, Suimei tossed a glance heavenward. The imperial city had not only a large, expansive street system, but many exceptionally tall buildings to line it. The outer wall guarding the circumference of the city was quite high, which seemed to increase the safe building limit for structures inside the city. They were far taller than anything he'd seen so far.

Even to an outsider like Suimei, Filas Philia gave off a discernably different impression than the royal capital of Metel in the Kingdom of Astel. There were plenty of people in Metel, but this place had a more modern feel to it. Both cities had parks, shops, and the like, but the maintenance of those places and basic needs like water and sewage management was impressive here. So in terms of development, Filas

Philia did seem to be the more advanced of the two.

However, even taking in the beautiful townscape—complete with remarkable buildings and children playing happily in fountains—a persistent hazy feeling lingered gloomily over Suimei's head. But there was a reason for his tired grumbling.

"I never thought Reiji and the others would be wiping my ass for me..."

Just how many times had he muttered that to himself already? From what he heard from the travelers at the checkpoint, Reiji and the others returned to Astel from the Empire, led an army from the kingdom, and defeated the demon general named Rajas along with his ten thousand subordinates.

Hearing this, of course, was a bolt out of the blue for Suimei. It was astonishing to say the least. And after hearing the "news" came a natural wave of bitterness. It manifested on his face now in the form of a grim expression. Seeing it, a slightly concerned Lefille called out to him.

"Suimei-kun, you're still talking about the rumor we heard from those travelers, right? We still don't know for certain whether they really defeated him or not."

"You're right. But it's not like I saw to it that Rajas was dead. And now people are throwing his name around with Reiji's, so based on that, I'm guessing there's an eight or nine out of ten chance that my attack isn't what finished him off..."

Suimei explained the main reason for his anguish with a sigh. He felt badly about troubling Reiji and the others, but it was the thought that his attack hadn't properly finished the job that left his pride as a magician in tatters. He'd stood at the ready and fired his anti-evil spirit, anti-demon magicka. He was near exhausted at the time, but he was still unhappy with the results. Even if it had only been a matter of time for the residual holy lightning to bring the demon down, the whole situation left a bad taste in his mouth after all.

"I'm seriously worthless. After running off at the mouth like that, for me to be unable to finish him in a single strike is just..."

"Don't be stupid. Even if it didn't finish him, it was enough, wasn't it? If anything, it's likely your friend came across Rajas in a compromised state. Just think of what would have happened if they'd run into him and you hadn't fought him first..."

Just as she was implying, they would likely be dead right now. However...

"You're probably right, but that's not the real problem here, you know? Hahh..."

"That the fact that you weren't able to finish him off is... Is what you want to say? I understand the feeling, but it's not good to just

keep sighing like that. If all you do is wallow in self-pity, then people will distance themselves from you.”

“Yeah, well, you’re certainly right there.”

Lefille’s words made Suimei reflect on himself and how he’d been acting. “If you keep sighing, people will distance themselves from you” was probably her own way of saying, “If you keep sighing, happiness will run away from you.” After all, people brought happiness, so if they avoided you, then happiness would too. And she was right. Nothing could be done if all he did was grumble all the time.

“Alright, let’s just drop that, and lift our spirits instead.”

“I agree. That’ll do you good.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Revealing her usually calm smile, Lefille enthusiastically thrust her fist into the air. At times like this, she brightened things up for the both of them.

“So, Lefille, you said you had somewhere you wanted to go, but where are we headed from here?”

“The Church of Salvation.”

“...Seriously?”



Suimei followed Lefille, and they arrived at an area near the gate to the outer wall. There stood one of several Churches of Salvation set up in various places throughout the imperial capital.

This would be the first time Suimei approached an institution of the largest religion in this world, but as he walked towards it, he couldn’t help noticing it gave off a different impression from the rest of the city. The walkway leading to it went from laid brickwork to scattered cobblestones. There was a well cared for flower bed, and also a small pond. There were even trees crowded next to each other, making this area the only place nearby where there was any greenery. Listening carefully, he could hear the songs of small birds. It was truly like a fresh and green holy ground. And in the midst of all of it stood a white building.

As if inviting them further in, a path spread out before them. Walking down it, Suimei could feel his face gradually grow more and more stern as they drew nearer to their ultimate destination.

“A church... A church, huh?”

“You’ve been muttering with that weird expression on your face for a while now, but is something up?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I just can’t get used to the atmosphere in this kinda place, you see...”

“You can’t get used to... a natural oasis that puts your soul at

ease?”

“Yeah, certainly the negative ions are just flowing out, and mana is also thick here, but...”

“C-Certainly, but neither of those are bad things, so what is it that troubles you?”

“It might just be my nature as a magician, I guess. All I can think when I see or hear anything about a church is that it’s a den for some of my worst enemies.”

Indeed, in Suimei’s world, magicians had many natural enemies. The church was the prime example. Typically, any religion that had a church fit the bill, but there was one monotheistic religion in particular that came to mind. That one that believed their god was incarnated as a savior, and treated its teachings as supreme. Generally, said religion believed that only people recognized by this or that were able to enact miracles. And those “miracles” were really the mysteries known as magicka that magicians used. Yet even though magicka existed even within their own teachings in that regard, a sect of said religion treated all mystical powers that were not handed down by their god as impure.

And so they made magicka out to be some unholy, ill-begotten power. They claimed that the miracles they recognized were the only legitimate power, meaning that magicians—the wielders of the power they decried—were the enemy and had to be eradicated. To say they were overzealous was probably the right way to put it.

And it was such zealotry that inspired most of history’s famous witch hunts, and was connected to Helen Duncan’s famous prohibition of the use of magic. It was all so the power of their faith could not be made light of. Naturally, other religions made similar claims. It was something of a vicious, extreme cycle. All religions placed a great deal of stock in what they believed to be miracles, while they condemned or denied the miracles of other faiths.

There were people who treated any and all involvement with magicka as evil, but there were also people who would manipulate spiritual information to swindle others. So needless to say, not everyone had fallen victim to blind faith that had run amok, although that was certainly the case for a certain group of people who claimed that magicka was heresy—the agents of the Holy Inquisition.

Of course, no normal church had such a group of extremists. However, even knowing that, Suimei had it firmly imprinted in him not to let his guard down and never to lose his focus.

“Are you referencing the circumstances of your world?”

“Yeah.”

“But if you lump them together like that, aren’t you just being utterly dismissive of our traditions?”

“Yeah, sorry, that wasn’t what I meant to do. My bad.”

Suimei timidly scratched his head and apologized. Lefille had her cheeks slightly puffed out, and she was staring down at the ground looking at nothing in particular. Seeing her like that struck a chord in Suimei, and he couldn’t help but feel compelled to apologize.

“...Well, setting that aside, is this place really okay?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I thought there was a much bigger church in the Empire, right? You know, that one that tourists from other countries come here to see all the time.”

“The Filas Philia Cathedral, you mean. It’s a place we talked about before, but... Honestly, I don’t really want to go to that kind of grand place.”

Lefille knit her brow as she said that. She appeared convinced that going to such a place would be trouble in a most taxing manner. Suimei was curious.

“Why’s that?”

“In a place like that, there will certainly be a virtuous priest present. In other words, someone in whom the Goddess’s blessed power is particularly strong. I think you’re better informed of such blessings and what their power means than I am, Suimei-kun, but... If someone like that saw through to my true identity, what do you think would happen?”

“Hmm? I didn’t really think anyone finding out you were a spirit would be a big deal... Was I wrong?”

Suimei asked because of something Lefille had once told him about this world previously. Here, the things known as spirits were something very close to people. And perhaps because Lefille was there, Suimei had even sensed the presence of a minor spirit approach them too. Based on all that, he didn’t think it was anything strange, but apparently he was mistaken. Lefille then grimaced as if a lump had formed above her eyes.

“Even as I am now, I have the spirit of the scarlet tempest—one who inherited the blood of Ishaktney. In Alshuna’s spirit legend, Ishaktney was Goddess Alshuna’s right hand who fought against the Evil God Zekaraia. In short, a direct subordinate of the Goddess herself. In other words...”

“If people found out, they would be suuuper excited. Definitely. Without a doubt.”

“That’s right. It was fine back in Noshias. Even if I am a half-spirit, everyone there still knew me as a person. Human. But in other regions, especially where the Church of Salvation has a strong presence... If my identity is discovered, it’ll probably turn into something preposterous.”

Looking as though she was recalling the horrible firsthand experience of witnessing such a spectacle play out, Lefille's face went pale and she began trembling. She'd said it would be "something preposterous." It wasn't like the church was some fanatic cult, but it wasn't hard to imagine them treating her like a living god. Rather, it was really easy to imagine Lefille's troubled face as people flocked to her.

"Hahaha, wouldn't that be fine in its own way?"

"This is no laughing matter! Just try having them pray to you day after day after day, weep as they give thanks, follow you around everywhere, and ask nonsensical questions like what the fate of the world is! It would depress you far beyond what you can imagine!"

"Yeah, that sounds... beyond unpleasant, hahaha..."

In response to Lefille's angry complaints, Suimei let out a strange laugh. Not moments later, they both heard the sound of hinges squeaking as they rubbed together from the direction of the church. Suimei turned to look, and was met with the sight of someone emerging from the building.

It was a man with swept-back hair, black but dotted with gray strands. He wasn't overly muscular, but certainly wasn't slight either. He was remarkably average-looking, but for some reason, Suimei felt like there was something unusual about him. Suimei couldn't really get a good read on the man, but he certainly didn't look to be the church type. He had a severe look on his face. His eyes were closed, yet he walked forward with confident steps. He was wearing what appeared to be dress clothes, the hems of which were swinging in the air.

The path to the church was narrow enough it would only allow for two people to walk abreast, so Suimei and Lefille quietly stepped aside to make way for the man. He lightly nodded to them as a gesture of acknowledgment, and continued along on his way.

Lefille craned her neck a bit to look behind her, and she stared at the man's back as if scrutinizing him. The sharp, discerning gaze she directed at him certainly wasn't something anyone would have expected from such a childish face.

"Suimei-kun, that man..."

"Did you notice something about him?"

"No, I just thought that he was quite the master..."

Quite the master? Suimei hadn't sensed any excess mana agitation as they crossed paths. He hadn't sensed anything mystical or any mysterious wrenching of phenomena around him either. In that case, Lefille had to mean...

"You mean... as a swordsman?"

"That's right, but... What's wrong? Don't you also have knowledge

of swords?”

“No, I mean, I do in fact use a sword too, but... I’m not so skilled that I can see through the subtleties of another swordsman. There’re a lot of strong guys who keep their skills hidden inside rather than letting them show, after all. I’m still a long ways away from being able to read those delicate signs.”

“Huh... I see.”

But that meant this man had to have considerable prowess. Even ignoring the fact that she was a spirit, Lefille possessed superior ability with a sword. So if she had seen something in someone that Suimei hadn’t, that was a testament to their power. It was something of the reverse, but a similar situation had occurred back at the checkpoint...

“You know, that girl from before... Liliana, was it? She gave off a strong vibe too, huh?”

Suimei was referring to the young mage called Liliana Zandyke. The mana she emanated wasn’t something Suimei could ignore. Just from what he’d seen then, he could see that she had considerable capabilities with magic. Even though she likely didn’t have a mana furnace, she really had some nerve to have that much mana in her.

“Liliana Zandyke, huh? There isn’t much known about her, but she participated in skirmishes with a country to the south several times, and she seems to have made a name for herself that way. They even call her the Empire’s human weapon.”

“That’s a hell of a nickname...”

“She apparently earned it because she indifferently carries out missions given to her, but the fact that she doesn’t show much emotion in the first place probably has something to do with it.”

That much was certainly true. Just from their brief interaction at the checkpoint, Suimei had gotten the impression Liliana wasn’t particularly expressive. They’d only exchanged a few words, however, so he didn’t know what she was really like.

“Oops, this isn’t the time for that. I need to go do my prayers quickly.”

With that, Lefille rushed ahead, tottered up the stairs, and opened the pure white doors. The instant she entered the church, she locked eyes on the Goddess’s statue and dashed over to it without a second thought or glance anywhere else. A devotee... No, since the Goddess Alshuna was something that truly existed in this world, it was a little different. Suimei followed her into the church, and gazed upward as if to inspect the ceiling.

A sanctuary of the Church of Salvation. Unlike the popular churches in his own world, there were no stained glass windows and no pipe organ. However, with its tranquil atmosphere and ornate statue, it largely gave off the same feeling.

The building itself had windows near the ceiling, and the sunbeams coming in through them scattered as they fell to the ground. Anywhere the sunlight didn't reach was warmly illuminated with magic. The sanctuary was dotted with people. There were small children dressed in clothing that didn't seem particularly lavish, calm elderly women, and well-kept elderly men. They all sat facing the statue and silently offering up prayers. It was a full-fledged, respectable church.

"Hello."

While Suimei was sizing up this church from another world, a woman's voice called to him from the side. Suimei turned around to greet whoever it was.

"Aah, hello... AAH!"

He managed something of a greeting, but was unable to restrain the surprise that escaped his throat as a half-shout, half-gasp. His eyes then darted around the room. Seeing him in such a fluster, the young woman dressed like a nun called out to him again, her head tilted to the side.

"Is something the matter?"

"E-Ears are attached!"

Suimei was unable to dispel his surprise in the end, such was the extent of his astonishment. And all he could do was incoherently declare what exactly it was that had caught his eye.

"Is that not obvious? You also appear to have ears, do you not?"

"Not that... I mean, um, *that*..."

"Ah, could it be that this is your first time seeing a therianthrope?"

"Uh..."

Hearing that word, Suimei recalled learning that the Empire was home to a wide variety of races. One of said races were something known as therianthropes. Born with characteristics of animals, they were a race native to this world that had power beyond that of normal humans.

And realizing that this woman was one of them, Suimei was finally able to make sense of her appearance. If she was a therianthrope, it wasn't all that strange for her to have animal ears. She was wearing what was likely the religious habit of the Church of Salvation, blue robes with frills. Under the veil that was attached to her outfit, Suimei could see slightly wavy pink hair. But most notably of all, there were feline ears popping out that were somewhat drooping over.

As Suimei nonchalantly looked at her face, she had a meek and gentle expression... but he felt a great wisdom in her that didn't betray an ounce of meekness. Finally responding to her, Suimei politely

apologized for his agitated behavior just moments ago.

"I was just so surprised to see those ears... My apologies for being shaken like that."

"Is that so? Then it's no wonder you were so surprised. People who have not seen therianthropes before often react that way."

The nun gave a moderate giggle. She carried herself like an older woman, which made Suimei feel a bit shy, but... Setting that aside, the cat-eared sister put her finger to her cheek and cocked her head to the side.

"Are you not going to pray?"

"No, I'm just that girl's escort."

Suimei nodded towards Lefille, who was kneeling down to offer her prayers. The sister once more gave a cheerful smile.

"Oh my, that is quite the small lover you have."

"Wha? What are you saying all of a—"

"But you mustn't do that. It is not smiled upon in the Empire for a man your age to accompany a small girl in that way, after all."

"Hahh... No, you've got it all wrong! I'm telling you, that's not what I meant when I said escort!"

"Heehee, I know. It was but a joke."

And with that, the sister confessed that she had intentionally gotten a rise out of him. But there was no malice in it. With her pleasant smile and her blooming figure, it looked like she was laughing at the man who was getting flustered for no reason. He had been completely outwitted. Suimei's shoulders drooped heavily. Then, in stark contrast to her previous lighthearted giggling, the sister looked over to Lefille and spoke quietly.

"What an ardent child."

"Yeah... When I asked her where she wanted to go when we made it to the capital, the first thing she said was the church. And here we are. She wants to pray at a church as much as she can while we're in town... Or so she said as she tugged on my sleeve all the way here."

"It seems she holds the teachings of our Goddess quite dear. At such an age, she certainly has her act together."

"Ahaha... Well, regarding her age, please don't say anything about it in front of her..."

"...?"

Unsure what Suimei was alluding to, the sister's ears pricked up and she looked at him curiously. Things certainly would be a lot easier if Lefille could return to her normal form, and not just for her.

And while Suimei was idly scratching the back of his head over such thoughts, he caught sight of the line that was forming next to Lefille. Now that the sermon was over, people were gathering before the priest with expectant, hopeful looks on their faces. Just what were

they waiting for? Suimei then decided to ask the sister about it.

“What is that line they’re forming after the service?”

“It is for Alshuna-sama’s oracle. After praying, His Excellency the Bishop will pass down oracles from our dear Goddess... though most people will not be so fortunate as to receive one themselves.”

“Hmm...”

So this was the oracle that had made Lefille go out on a limb and introduce herself to Suimei in the first place. He could see the priest standing next to the statue, holding a book to his chest as he muttered something quietly. Looking closely, Suimei could see certain localized signs of power. He couldn’t feel a spell or the movement of mana, but locally, just where the priest was, there was theurgy at work and the aetheric was markedly pronounced.

It was likely that the priest was using his own body as an intermediary to allow for the intervention of the Goddess. He was a genuine oracle. As Suimei saw through his power and muttered a word or two of admiration, the sister gave him a puzzled look.

“I have to say it’s unexpected that you are unaware of such oracles. You should find such scenes in any church...”

“There is no Church of Salvation where I’m from, you see.”

“Oh my, how unusual. However, the village that I came from also did not have faith in the Goddess, so I understand.”

She clapped her hands together as if this realization was an unexpected coincidence, and a sweet smile bloomed on her face. It was a serene expression. Somehow between that and her animalistic presence, she gave off a very tranquil atmosphere that tugged at Suimei’s heart.

“Which reminds me though...”

“What is it?”

“Could it be that you arrived in Filas Philia today?”

“You can tell?”

“It seems this is your first time seeing a therianthrope, and... I just had something of a feeling.”

“Oof... My ignorance has been exposed, huh?”

Since he had been looking around at everything with interest and asking things that were generally considered common sense, the sister probably saw him as if he was a country bumpkin or something. As Suimei belittled himself in a joking tone, the sister became a little flustered as though she thought she’d said something rude.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean it in that way...”

Seeing her react that way, Suimei flashed a refreshing smile as he continued with a slightly impish air about him.

“So, would you mind enlightening an ignorant fool like me with some welcoming information?”

“Y-Yes, of course, but... It’s not all that welcoming as far as information goes, I’m afraid.”

“Did something happen?”

“Two or three things. Between the good story and the not so pleasant one, which would you rather hear first?”

“Please start with the worse one. Hearing the good story afterwards will help mitigate whatever the bad news is.”

“Alright then...”

With that, the sister’s gentle expression took a turn for the grim, and she began speaking as if presenting him with advice.

“You said that you have only just arrived in the imperial capital, but if that is the case, please do be careful about going out at night. Recently, there have been troubling incidents happening in the city.”

“Troubling incidents, you say?”

“Yes. It started about a month ago, I believe. When morning comes around, people have been frequently discovered in a comatose state, and it has been fanning the anxiety of the people who live in the imperial capital.”

“That is quite a story, isn’t it? Is it something like a hoodlum attacking people and leaving them in a coma?”

“It seems that way, yes. It’s clearly the aftereffects of being struck by magic, so there’s no mistaking that someone is attacking people.”

“But you said a month, didn’t you? It’s been going on that long and it hasn’t been resolved?”

“Regarding that, the military police have been trying everything they can, but nothing has come of it as of yet. There aren’t many clues that would lead to the culprit’s trail, and because the effects and destructive force of the magic being used is quite unusual, it seems they’ve been unable to even determine what attribute was used. And so I’m afraid there haven’t been any leads on the case.”

She cast her eyes downward, disappointed. It seemed she was truly a kindhearted person. She looked pained, as if she was thinking about the victims and what they and their loved ones had been through.

“Sister, you sure are well informed, huh?”

“Yes, many people come and visit the church, so I hear of many matters.”

As if indicating her acute sense of hearing, her ears twitched a few times. Suimei’s heart jumped. He really wanted to touch them, but knew he had to resist the urge. Surely that would be considered rude. Suddenly looking up, the sister clapped her hands together heartily as if she’d remembered something.

“However, the hero has been added to the investigation of this incident. It will likely be resolved in short order.”

“The hero?”

“Yes. The esteemed hero who was summoned in the Holy State of El Meide is currently staying here in Filas Philia.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It has not yet been announced to the general public, but it will likely soon be unveiled by the imperial government and the Church of Salvation. Is that not good news?”

Was it? Either way, it piqued Suimei’s interest. The Holy State of El Meide was the neutral religious state to the south of the Empire, and there was no way Suimei wouldn’t be curious about what kind of hero had been summoned there. He was extremely interested in finding out what the heroes other than Reiji were like, hoping it might help him grasp the trend behind the summonings.

“Moreover, it seems that the esteemed summoned hero of the Saadias Alliance also went on the move the other day.”

“Now that you mention it, there are a total of four summoned heroes, right?”

“The esteemed hero who was summoned in the Saadias Alliance is apparently a beautiful woman. Her skill with the sword is apparently quite something. Her mastery with the blade is said to be so brilliant that she could easily handle the Alliance’s swordsmen and the suzerain’s first prince, who is known as the Sword King.”

So the third hero was a woman. Thinking about their demographics so far, Suimei began wondering what exactly the requirements for being summoned were. At the very least, he now knew that being a man was off the table. But be that as it may...

“Girls are seriously strong, huh? What’s with that...?”

“...Did you say something?”

It seemed the sister heard Suimei’s grumbling, but he brushed it off by saying it was nothing. It was likely that the answer to the mystery he was pondering would not come to him for all eternity. And as he turned the matter over in his head, the sister clasped both her hands together in front of her large chest again.

“With this, we have reason to hope the subjugation of the Demon Lord and demon armies will go well.”

“That is good news, yeah.”

As Suimei nodded, he cast a glance around the room. At the front of the line before the priest was a young girl. And before Suimei even realized it was Lefille who was receiving her oracle, she raised a desperate voice.

“Wh-What did you say?! Ah, n-no, i-is that really true?!”

Indeed, Lefille approached the priest in a panicked fluster. He looked troubled for a moment as Lefille clung to him, but as he was the one who managed the oracles, he must have been used to such

interactions. His expression tightened back up into a solemn one, and he nodded firmly.

“No way!”

Apparently not getting the answer she wanted, Lefille’s shouted out in what was near a scream. She then immediately turned towards Suimei for advice.

“S-Suimei-kun! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! It’s serious!”

“You’re panicking too much, Lefille. What’s up with you?”

“There’s nothing up or down! Wh-What should I do?!”

“Okay, for starters... You need to calm down and tell me what happened. We can go from there.”

But Lefille had already lost her composure, and she cried out to Suimei in response.

“An oracle! I got another oracle!”

“Again...? So?”

It wasn’t normal for her to be so flustered. Just what kind of absurd instruction had the Goddess passed on to her this time?



“Here, huh...?”

“Looks like it.”

A few days after Suimei and Lefille arrived in the imperial capital of the Nelferian Empire, they took an excursion into the back of the residential area of northwest of Filas Philia.

Naturally, the buildings were closely packed together like they would be in any city, and characteristic of the imperial capital in particular, a great many of them were tall. Perhaps because of that, despite being daytime, it was quite gloomy. In the modern world, there would undoubtedly be lawsuits about people’s rights to sunshine. Casually looking up and down the nooks of alleyways, there were sad little weeds growing here and there, but other than that, all was shadow. It was like whatever sunshine there was was promptly absorbed by the gloom. To compare it to something from his own world, this was a slum. A back alley slum described it perfectly. At a glance, most of the surrounding structures were cheap-looking.

But that’s exactly why they’d come. Yes, their first real order of business after arriving in the Empire was securing a place to live. Suimei was planning on gathering information and goods in Nelferia, and Lefille wanted to study at the Magic Institute. After leaving the church on their first day in town, they’d gone to look for traders who mediated in the sale of residences. Because the majority of the imperial capital was under management of the imperial government, they’d ended up making their way to a government office. From there, they were referred to the supervisor of a district containing a

residence that matched their specifications. And today, they had arranged to meet this supervisor and see the property.

They'd come to a stop along the street and weren't proceeding any further. It wasn't like they'd been overcome by the gloom, though Lefille looked up at Suimei anxiously.

"Suimei-kun, is this place really alright?"

"Hmm? It'll probably be fine. I'm sure this is where we were supposed to meet."

"I'm not talking about that; I'm talking about where we're going to live. It's close to a main street, so the location isn't bad, but somehow... The atmosphere, you know?"

The more Lefille looked around, the more her doubts grew. Certainly it was just as her anxious gaze indicated, the place didn't give off a great impression. There wasn't much light, and there was also some kind of stench coming from who knows where. It was close to the main street, but it wouldn't qualify as good real estate by most people's standards.

"Well, this was the only property that matched our requests. We'll just have to put up with a few things."

"You're right. I guess not everything can be perfect..."

"It's no big deal, we can't do much about the sunlight, but the smell and other things can be improved, so there's nothing to really worry about..."

Even as Suimei tried to tell her that it would work out, Lefille kept her gaze fixed on the somewhat dirty, spread out bricks in the road below her feet. Was she that worried about the pros and cons of a place to live? The usual Lefille would have laughed something like this off as she bravely stepped up to the plate in the face of a challenge, but not now. Suimei had an idea as to what might be weighing her down.

"What, are you still worried about that oracle?"

"O-Of course I am! I got *that* kind of oracle, you know?!"

By *that* kind of oracle, she meant that the Goddess's word she had received at the local Church of Salvation was well beyond the realm of what she could have possibly imagined. Indeed, the instructions passed down to Lefille were: "Act together with the hero staying in the Empire, and fight the demons."

The Goddess apparently wanted her to follow someone she had never even met—the hero summoned in El Meide. For Lefille, who had just reached the imperial capital in pursuit of her own goals, this seemed all too sudden. In fact, it seemed that Lefille was outright opposed to the oracle she'd received. She'd thrown a fit in the church when she first heard it, and after finally calming down, she'd fallen into her current slump. Suimei, however, thought the solution was

pretty clear.

"If you don't want to listen to Alshuna or whoever, then I think it's probably fine if you don't. You can just pretend to forget."

"I-I can't exactly do that. After receiving a message from the Goddess Alshuna, it would be dishonorable not to heed it."

"Dishonorable...? You're talking about your power, aren't you? Listen, it's not like you guys talked this over. It's all one-sided, isn't it? You didn't even ask for your power, you know? So using that as a premise to ask you to do something else is a bit much, yeah?"

"Th-That may be the case, but..."

Lefille's voice gradually tapered off until it was inaudible. She found herself so lost in the maze of faith exactly because she was devout. From time to time, the strong of faith tried to deny themselves and their desires. In their place, they would impose obligation on themselves. They believed they walked the straight and narrow that way, and clung to it as if it were the only way. And so their faith hung over them like the sword of Damocles.

Of course, there were those who lived pure and beautiful lives with their strong sense of faith and values, but obstinacy in those things could have detrimental effects. Forcing yourself to live one way when you want to live another can tear someone apart. And if things kept going like this...

"So are you gonna meet up with this hero from El Something or what?"

"D-Do I even have to say it?! It's obvious that I don't want to!"

"It's obvious, huh? Well, if that's the case, then that's all the more reason you shouldn't just drop everything and do what they want you to, right...?"

In the end, Suimei cared about what Lefille wanted to do for herself. And even though she stubbornly, dejectedly declared that she didn't want to go through with it...

"That in and of itself would be making slight of the Goddess's words, and if something were to happen because of it, I..."

She didn't want that to happen either. Swallowed by waves of self-condemnation, she was unable to act according to her own will. Suimei didn't think that was right. He thought she should be able to do what she wanted, rather than be bound by what some goddess said.

"Got it. I'll do something about it."

"What? What do you mean you'll do something about it?"

"Just what I said. If you don't want to go along, then just don't go along. And if you're told to, then I'll pull you back. And if anybody says anything, I'll do something about it. You should be allowed to follow your heart, right?"

Even if she couldn't bring herself to willfully act against the order, that didn't mean she had to follow it. And Suimei was willing to do his part as her partner. Even if it wasn't what Lefille had intended, if he was the one who held her back, then it was no reflection on her faith if she couldn't complete the divine quest she'd unwillingly been assigned. And now that she understood what he meant, an entirely different anxiety filled her.

"Y-You can't! That would be defying the Goddess, Suimei-kun! If you do such a thing, you'll..."

"Like I care. It's not like I worship this goddess of yours anyways. Come heaven, hell, Eden, or Hades, you think I give a crap? Besides, magicians are just the type to pick a fight against everything in the world, even higher powers, in the quest to become omnipotent. We're practically all people who just spit at the heavens."

"But even so, if you provoke the wrath of the Goddess..."

"Yeah, I don't really mind. There're tons of guys all over the globe who disobey their gods. And yet the world still goes round. Thinking that you can't live if you oppose the goddess is putting a little too much faith in the system, I'm telling ya."

"Even so, even so... If something were to happen..."

Lefille looked up at Suimei with desperate eyes. In response, he closed one eye and scoffed as if to say, "So what if it did?"

"Even so. If they were to stand in my way, then it just means I have to brush them aside, and I'll proceed onward like I always do. Be it Goddess or Evil God, it doesn't matter to me... Hmph. If a being that can only intervene from the astral plane wants to try playing their hand, then they should just fucking try it. Like I'm going to lose to some idiot who couldn't finish off the Evil God on their own and can only pass down orders from on high."

"Y-You're talking about an almighty being here, you know? No matter how strong you are, it would never..."

"Even so, that's what I'm aiming for. And if I back down from that, I can't call myself a magician."

The people that Suimei wanted to protect, he wanted to protect from anything and everything. That was the drive he had within him. And to answer to that, he'd become a magician. He wouldn't stand for denying it. He would stake his eye on it. And having caught a glimpse of Suimei's resolve...

"Ah... Mm, thanks..."

"Wha...? Y-Yeah."

Averting her eyes, Lefille thanked him while fidgeting. Suimei turned bashful at the sight of her... but only for an instant.

"Ooh, so you made it!"

A lively voice interrupted the sweet atmosphere that had

developed between Suimei and Lefille. Looking to its source, they saw a girl with bright blue hair dressed in clothes that were easy to move in. She had large, round eyes and a somewhat cute face. She had what appeared to be a tattoo running down from her cheek to the back of her neck. At a glance, she seemed quite lively.

However, she was small. She was short in stature, had a small chest... Everything about her was small. At a glance, she was approximately the same as Lefille.

Another little girl, huh? I mean, Lefille isn't really a little girl, but still...

After what had happened at the checkpoint, Suimei was starting to feel like he was meeting nothing but little girls. That sentiment manifested in Suimei's tense gaze as he assessed the new arrival, and the girl blatantly strained her face as if she saw something disgusting in return.

"What's your problem? I'm not sure I like the way you're looking at me."

"No, sorry. I've been seeing nothing but children lately, so it was something of a reflex."

"Ch-Children?! Are ya talking about me?"

"I am... What about it?"

When he declared that, the girl's eyes suddenly narrowed menacingly. Then, with a threatening tone no one would have imagined coming from her cute face, she got aggressive.

"From the looks of it, boy, you're plenty younger than me. You got some nerve to say that kinda crap, doncha?"

"Huh? Boy?"

"Yeah, boy. You look just like a wee thing that just got outta Salvation School."

What was this girl talking about? From the sound of it, she was upset because Suimei was treating her like she was much younger than she actually was. But she certainly did look young. Was she altering her appearance to look young again like one of those senile magicians? As Suimei pondered all this, Lefille seemed to arrive at some sort of understanding. She clapped her hands together and spoke in an excited tone.

"Could it be that you're a dwarf?!"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm the genuine article, both my old man and my ma are dwarves. Purebred right here."

"Wha..."

"You sounded like you came to see us when you got here, which means..."

"Indeed, indeed! It's just as you guessed, missy. I'm the one who supervises this place, Jillbert Griga."

“Ummm... I’m completely outta the loop here.”

“What’s that?”

Having been left behind as the conversation progressed, Suimei looked troubled. The girl—Jillbert Griga—was still glaring at him like she was ready to square up, however. It completely spoiled her cute face.

“Hahh... What’s with you? This kid’s sharp as a tack, but you’re a slow one, ainch?”

“Slow? Listen here, you...”

Suimei was offended, of course, but still taken aback enough that all he could really do was convey his dissatisfaction with an exasperated expression. Why’d she have to go that far? Lefille had called her a dwarf, so he could pretty much guess why she was offended, but...

“That’s not it. He’s just never seen a dwarf before.”

“Hmh? Aah, s’tat so? Well, in that case, guess there’s no helping a misunderstanding, huh?”

“...This is a super rude question, but how old are you?”

“Me? I’ll be twenty-one this year.”

“You’re really older than me, huh...? I mean, of course you are.”

“That’s right. To immediately fix your tone like that, boy, you look kinda stupid, but you do got your act together, doncha? Seems you know your manners after all. Good, good.”

Jillbert, both hands on her hips, took a cocky tone with Suimei. Lefille patted her on the shoulder and told her she was fine just the way she was.

Dwarves. According to Norse mythology, they were categorized as a type of fairy who lived in the underground world. They were essentially the opposite of the beautiful fairies of the same origin, the alfar or elves, and were a subhuman existence with blackish, hideous bodies referred to as dvergar or dark elves. According to the tales, they excelled in smithing and craftsmanship, and created tools that could rival the power of the gods. At times they would quarrel with the gods, and at others, cooperate with them. They were creatures depicted in all manner of ways and in all sorts of stories. From the folklore that stemmed from there, they were modeled after gentle or mischievous little people.

Something like a beard... Well, the tattoo kinda looks like one, and she’s pretty petite. But why is it that age and beauty have completely no connection...?

Not much would come from trying to decipher it. This was a different world, which likely meant that all bets were off. But Suimei aside, it seemed that Jillbert had taken a liking to Lefille, and the two of them were getting engrossed in chatting about clothes and other

such topics. He was sorry to interrupt while they were having fun, but Suimei wanted to get things moving.

“Excuse me, but would you mind introducing us to the house now?”

“Hmm? Aah, now that you mention it, you’re right. You came to see the place, dincha? Plum slipped my mind.”

“H-Hey, that’s the whole reason we’re here.”

“Don’t worry ’bout it. It’s lame for a man to worry ’bout such minor details, ya know? So impatient... You a virgin?”

“Ugh...”

The lips on her cute face were curled up into a broad, biting grin. Truly a dvergar. Just as insolent as the legends stated. She sure could let her mouth run.

Jillbert walked off with a bounding stride, and when they followed, Suimei and Lefille were guided to a somewhat large, detached house interposed between several housing complexes.

“Just as requested, it’s quite spacious, innit?”

“Hmm...”

Suimei began inspecting the place, peering in the entrance and raising his eyes to the ceiling. The inside was made of wood, and it appeared to have been a while since the place was last occupied. The pillars and joists used seemed to be rather large, and the construction of the building itself was quite solid. Perhaps that was to be expected from the Empire where water and sewage services were all in order, and Suimei certainly had no objections to a readily available water supply.

The three of them briefly looked around the rooms, and as they returned to the corridor back at the entrance, Jillbert spoke up in a somewhat expectant voice.

“Watcha think?”

“It isn’t bad. It meets all our requirements, and it’s actually much better than I was expecting.”

“Of course it is. It’s one of my properties, ya know? Ain’t a single thing wrong with it.”

Saying that, Jillbert thrust out her petite chest and once more took on her cocky attitude. Lefille, however, dropped her gaze to the floor and spoke in a somewhat distant voice.

“Suimei-kun, I’m glad you chose such a nice place...”

“Hmm?”

She was giving her blessing, but something wasn’t right. It was like she was talking about somebody else’s affairs entirely. As Suimei puzzled over the subtleties of her heart that made her talk like that, she continued to speak in the same unnatural way.

“N-Next is where I’ll be living...”

“Huh...? Where you’ll be living?”

“That’s right. You’ve found a place, so I need to do the same.”

“Why? What about here? Since it’s so spacious, can’t we just live together?”

“Eh—That’s, um... Won’t I be a nuisance?”

She answered with a perplexed tone and what looked like a completely bewildered expression. Her eyes were open wide. Suimei hadn’t realized that what was weighing on her mind was that she was worried about bothering him. It was rather innocent, but it was just like her.

“You think you’ll be a nuisance, huh? Even if you are, this is what I was planning from the start, you hear?”

“Really?!”

Lefille eagerly asked for confirmation like this was a most unexpected but pleasant surprise. It was like she wanted to make sure she hadn’t misheard him. Walking up to her, Suimei leaned over and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Well, you know... In that form, you won’t have an easy time finding a place on your own. And that’s not to mention the curse.”

“But... that’s not your responsibility. Besides, you have your own goals to accomplish, right?”

“It’s fine. This is the ship I boarded. And on that note, I’m sticking with you until it’s dispelled.”

“—?!”

When Suimei said those last few words, a surprised look crossed Lefille’s face for a moment before she suddenly embraced him with all of her might.

“Thank you, Suimei-kun!”

“O-Oh...”

She was even rubbing her soft and squishy cheeks against his. Was she that overcome with emotion? She’d been all alone with no one to help her or stay by her side. So thinking about it, her reaction to Suimei saying he’d stick with her was quite understandable, but that didn’t abate his embarrassment over it. He also realized a cold stare was being directed at him from the side.

“Jillbert-san, is something the matter?”

“Hey, are you, ya know, that pedophile that we’ve been hearing about on the streets lately?”

“No, you’re wrong, I’m not really...”

Trying to explain himself, Suimei pushed Lefille away for the moment. And as if she was looking at something filthy, Jillbert took a step back like she was ready to run away.

“Stay back. And get away from Lefille. And keep more than five meters away from me. And don’t get a damn bit closer, ya hear?”

“Please listen to people when they talk. It’s a misunderstanding...”

“Guys who say stuff like that are often secretly evil, ya know.”

“That’s enough of that... Anyways, I had one more request.”

“Hmm... Aah, yeah, it’s over there. This here place has one.

Follow me.”

As Suimei changed the subject, Jillbert made a somewhat curt reply and showed the two of them to a room further into the house.

“Suimei-kun, what is Jillbert talking about?”

“Oh, that? A bathroom.”

“A bathroom?! Does this house have a place to take baths?!”

Lefille questioned him in an excited voice, but it was Jillbert that turned around and answered her in Suimei’s stead.

“Of course it does. This is the imperial capital, ya know. Of course houses here have baths. That should go without saying.”

Again, she was essentially bragging. But the moment she got the confirmation she wanted, Lefille ran over towards Jillbert as if she was flying. Suimei followed after them, and they arrived at a bathroom constructed out of cleanly polished stones and gypsum. Inside the room, what appeared to be a brand new wooden bathtub had been set up. Slapping it heartily, Jillbert went back to bragging.

“Innit a fine specimen?”

“Waaah...”

By the time Suimei caught up, Lefille was already looking at the bathtub with sparkling eyes. The Kingdom of Astel had virtually no bathing culture, so until recently, they’d had to make do using stiff, steamed cloth to give themselves sponge baths. As a native of Noshias, which had the same bathing customs as the Empire, Lefille had been particularly affected during her stay in Astel. This was actually one of the reasons Lefille badgered Suimei to get to the capital so quickly, and in that regard, Suimei agreed. He was also quite fed up with the lack of bathing after being summoned to another world, and he absolutely wanted a bathroom with a bathtub in the house that would serve as his base no matter what.

So as a girl who knew the importance of bathing, of course Lefille was delighted. Losing sight of herself in the excitement, however...

“Suimei-kun! It’s somewhere to take a bath! Somewhere to take a bath—can you believe it?! Let’s get in right away!”

She was in such high spirits that her usual serious demeanor was nowhere to be seen. She was acting nothing like her ordinarily refined self.

“We need to clean the rooms and get all sorts of things ready first, so it’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Ah... Yes, you’re right.”

Hearing that she wouldn’t be able to get in today, Lefille lost all

her steam and her shoulders drooped dejectedly. And once more, Suimei felt a cold stare fall upon him. As expected, it was coming from Jillbert.

“...What is it? Why are you looking at me like I’m the plague?”

“It’s just like I thought, punk. You’re really that pedophile, aincha?”

“I don’t recall saying *anything* perverted in that conversation, and certainly nothing that would give you that impression.”

“Missy’s talking about getting in the bath, and it sounds like she means together, don’t she?”

“Y-Y-You’re wrong! P-Perhaps my wording may have been misleading, but that was absolutely not my intent.”

“See? That’s how it is. I’m not entering the bath together with Lefille.”

Suimei stated his case flatly, but for some reason, Lefille turned towards him with an anxious expression.

“Suimei-kun, d-do you hate the idea... of taking a bath with me?”

“Wha? Lefille, what the hell are—”

“Well, do you...?”

“Huh? No, that’s, um...”

“Hey, the hell are ya stuttering about there, you pedophile? You damn enemy of female dwarves...”

“L-L-Like I’ve been saying, y-you’ve got it wrong...”

Suimei seemed unable to articulate himself well, and it seemed more and more like this wasn’t going to go in his favor. Now that Jillbert thought he was a pedophile, he felt trapped. No matter what he did, she wasn’t going to let it go.

“Hahh...”

Under Jillbert’s harsh gaze, Suimei let out a heavy sigh.

However, now that Suimei was about to get his hands on a house to use as a base, he would finally be able to get started on properly researching the hero summoning magicka circle. A base was the first real step to any serious magicka study. Without a dedicated space for research, nothing would get done. He would still have to make his magicka items by hand from scratch, but if he made a room where he could perform various rituals, his research should proceed relatively swiftly.

“Hey, pedophile, didn’t I tell ya not to get any closer? You got ears attached to that head of yours or what?”

“Give it a fucking rest already, you legal delinquent loli! I’ve been saying I’m not a goddamn pedophile this whole time, haven’t I?!”

And in the end, somehow or other, Suimei ended up on good terms with Jillbert in the sense that they certainly didn’t hold back with each other.



Kurant City. Blessed with underground water from the mountain range to the north, it was one of the easier places to live within the Kingdom of Astel, even in regards to climate. If it had a drawback, it was that its proximity to the national border was a risk. Even in the war a hundred years ago, it was a highly contested battleground.

But at the same time, the city had developed exactly because it lay directly on the main highway between the Empire and the Alliance, so it had benefited significantly from trade in the area. The royal capital of Metel was esteemed for its refined sense of old customs, but Kurant City was so beautifully well maintained that it was easy to mistake as more developed than Metel. The citizens lived quite well there.

The city itself was well defended, and the new discovery of magic-resistant materials was being used to improve those defenses even more. The city's ramparts and military installations were being reinforced to help keep the Empire in check. In an emergency, Kurant City served as the secondary defense line for the Kingdom of Astel right after the border fortress.

And Kurant City, being both commercial and fortified, was where Reiji and his cohorts presently were. After defeating Rajas, they were invited there by Hadorious, and immediately participated in a parade for their triumphant return upon arrival. The people of the city extolled Reiji's achievement in exterminating a demon army, falsified though it was.

After several hectic days passed, they were now staying at an inn within Kurant City. For exceptional guests like the princess and the hero, it was common for them to stay at the duke's mansion, but they had instead accepted accommodations at a local inn at Titania's request. Even if Hadorious was an ally, his company and his kindness weren't things to be accepted at face value. Titania personally still felt uncomfortable around him.

Relaxing in the inn, Reiji, Mizuki, and Titania were sitting on sofas as they faced each other in a circle. After gulping down a few sips of the rose water that had been prepared for them, Mizuki let out a rose-scented sigh at finally being able to take a breather.

"The parade... was amazing, huh?"

"You're right. It was probably even more expensive than the one we had in Metel."

Reiji agreed with Mizuki there. The parade to celebrate Reiji's triumphant return lasted three whole days. Even though the parade they'd had in Metel to commemorate their departure had been quite grand, this one had lasted three days. It was grander than grand. Mizuki nonchalantly reflected on what that meant as she looked out

the window with a pensive gaze.

“I was thinking about it during the parade, but Kurant City is pretty affluent, huh? But this is all land that man governs...”

“Duke Hadorious is a grand noble who governs over a large amount of territory, including Kurant City. Considering his authority, assets, and military power, there is likely no noble within Astel who could be considered superior to him short of the royal family.”

It was Titania that responded to Mizuki, explaining Hadorious’s situation in more detail. He governed over a city that prided itself on being second to the royal capital in terms of size. The power to contend with a demon general, the assets to hold a lavishly grand parade, and the authority to carry it out... From what they’d learned of Hadorious in the past few days, they’d come to learn what he was truly capable of. His severe personality seemed to make a bit more sense in light of it all.

“But still, even if we all did well, it wasn’t like I was the one who really did it...”

Rajas had been defeated at the hands of everyone’s power. Reiji knew taking credit for it all was unmerited.

“Regarding that matter... My apologies. However, for our country, making it out to be the hero’s achievement is advantageous.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

The reason Hadorious had suggested it in the first place was naturally to inspire the people and give them reason to think the demons were weakening. Titania understood that well, which is why she approved of such a grand parade to celebrate the achievement. Reiji knew all that, but felt what he’d accomplished himself in reality was insignificant. Snatching the benefits up like a hyena didn’t sit well with him. Reflecting on all this, Mizuki spoke up in a sullen tone.

“It’s quite a common story, isn’t it? For someone to use the achievements of another, or to make use of anything for their own benefit... It just sounds like something a noble would do. But, like I thought, this involves politics with the other countries too, doesn’t it?”

“That is precisely the case. And it is exactly for this reason that Duke Hadorious is someone that you cannot be careless around. After using Suimei as a decoy, and without even apologizing to his good friend Reiji-sama, he’d then make use of you as political tools against the Empire... He even possessed the cunning to hatch a quick plan to keep Princess Graziella in check.”

Titania paused for a moment and sighed, but then reiterated her warning.

“I will be repeating myself again and again, but do make sure never to be negligent around him.”

She was supremely wary of the duke. She said it was a

combination of the impressions she'd gotten from her interactions with him, as well as her intuition. Reiji thought it was because she hated him, and certainly that played a part in it, but her reasons likely outweighed that. Pondering such things, Reiji posed the princess a question.

"Hey, Tia, what do you think of using Suimei and the others as a decoy? Leaving out the fact that you are Suimei's friend as well as ours. In the end, as a princess of the Kingdom of Astel..."

"Certainly, my thoughts on the matter are complicated. When considering the harm a demon army could wreak on the populace, if such an act was necessary, then it was necessary."

As though that was the prelude to something greater, Titania suddenly bowed her head down deeply. The gesture came as a surprise, and both Reiji and Mizuki raised their voices in bewilderment. What left Titania's mouth next was an apology.

"My apologies, Reiji-sama, Mizuki. After hearing of it, I thought that, objectively speaking, it was the right hand to play."

"No, it's fine. In your position, thinking that way is understandable. Right? Mizuki?"

"Yeah..."

Reiji looked to Mizuki for agreement, but the sad way she averted her eyes conveyed her uncertainty. Suimei was the first good friend she'd ever had. It wasn't like they were lovers, but she thought of him frequently and cared a great deal for him. Once more looking out the window, her thoughts turned to him.

"Suimei-kun... In the end, we never found him."

"It's alright. It's Suimei we're talking about. I'm sure he's safe."

"Cause he's shrewd?"

"Yeah. Sensei said so too, remember?"

Reiji recalled Felmenia's words.

"Regarding Suimei-dono, he is surely safe."

She'd given them that sign of hope before she parted ways with the group. It seemed that she truly understood their worries.

"I did not believe White Flame-dono's words to be a mere consolation. It's likely she has somehow or other gained insight into the situation in her own way. It's not impossible that she caught hold of his tracks herself."

"Caught hold of his tracks how?"

"That is to say, as one would expect, with magic. White Flame-dono is known throughout the land as a genius mage who is capable of creating unprecedented original magic, after all."

"Ah..."

Hearing Titania say that, Mizuki recalled Felmenia's reputation as a court mage. And following after her, Reiji clapped his hands

together, encouraged. Not moments later, a reserved knock and a reserved voice came from the other side of the door. It was Roffrey.

“Excuse me, Reiji-sama, is now a good time?”

“Roffrey? Yeah, come on in.”

“Pardon my intr... Your Highness! M-My sincerest apologies!”

After opening the door and looking in the room, Roffrey looked flustered as though he'd entered a place he shouldn't have. He bowed his head in a panic. It seemed that he thought that Reiji and Titania were alone together, and had gotten the wrong idea. Guessing at the misunderstanding, Titania let out a small sigh and reassured him.

“It's quite fine. Besides, Mizuki is also here.”

“Huh? Ah, so she is...”

Roffrey's expression went blank. He looked absentminded, or what one would call vulnerable on the battlefield. Considering the previous tension in the room, it was unexpectedly refreshing. Mizuki turned to him with a smirk.

“Heeey, Roffrey-san, just what kinda stuff were you thinking about, I wonder?”

“What?! N-No! I was not particularly thinking of anything strange!”

“I never said a word about anything strange, though...”

“I... wuh, I, uh, uh, uh...”

Realizing he was tripping all over himself, Roffrey could only panic as he moved about in a fluster. Taking pity on him, Reiji called out to Mizuki. She then smiled as if to say she'd only been kidding, and relented. It didn't need to be said that she looked rather impishly pleased with herself. Assuming that Roffrey had come by for a reason, Reiji then moved to get down to business.

“So, Roffrey, what's going on?”

“I came to inform you that a messenger has arrived from Duke Hadorious.”



Having suddenly received an invitation from Hadorious, Reiji followed the messenger who was waiting in front of the inn, and was escorted to the duke's estate. And now, with quite a stiff expression on his face, he stood in front of Hadorious's private room.

Reiji could hear the sound of a musical instrument. It was likely a performer playing music somewhere in the mansion. It resounded through the walls and the air, and the softly muffled melody calmed his heart with its gentleness. Listening to it, Reiji once more readied himself for his audience with the owner of the room in front of him.

Before leaving the inn, Titania had warned him to be careful, and Mizuki had expressed her concern. The other party was Hadorious,

after all. They had also said that Reiji didn't have to respond to the duke's invitation, but Reiji had his own thoughts on the matter.

Indeed, he knew that there was some ulterior motive behind this meeting. Just as Titania said, he was a man that couldn't be fully trusted. He had no real evidence to think that the duke was up to something, yet he had an unshakable premonition of it. From now on, it was very likely that he would confront Hadorious many times over. Thus, Reiji couldn't just say that he didn't want to meet him. After all, it would be better for him to probe the disposition of the man named Lucas de Hadorious at an earlier stage than a later one.

And to that end, Reiji once more steeled his resolve and knocked on the door. Following Hadorious's voice asking who was knocking, Reiji identified himself. The duke curtly told him to enter.

Reiji politely announced himself as he opened the door, and a space like a luxuriously laid out parlor spread out before his eyes. Taking a step forward into the room, he offered a brief greeting, and then began a businesslike exchange with Hadorious, who was seated elegantly upon the couch.

"Hero-dono, are you not going to sit?"

"In my country, it's customary for a guest to take a seat only after it is encouraged by the owner of the room, so I am somewhat hesitant to do so of my own accord, you see."

Reiji replied with a slightly sharp tone, and he couldn't really tell whether Hadorious minded or not. The duke then offered a bit of admiration for his manners.

"My... The country that Hero-dono is from honors etiquette quite considerably, I see. Then, must I also encourage you in this regard?"

Following Hadorious's gaze, Reiji spied a glass on top of the table with liquid in it a similar tint to his own reddish hair.

"Is this wine?"

"Yes, a sweetened one. The taste isn't bad."

Even so...

"I appreciate the consideration, but..."

"Does Hero-dono not drink wine?"

"In the country I am from, it's forbidden for people my age who haven't reached adulthood yet to partake of alcohol... Anything with spirits or wine in it, so I will have to refrain here."

Reiji gave a taciturn reply, but Hadorious took a sip from the glass and questioned him further.

"Hmph, so why is there that sort of law?"

"Until humans exceed roughly twenty years in age, their capability of digesting wine and spirits is rather low. Such drinks have a negative effect on the body itself, especially in regards to those who have yet to reach adulthood, so it is prohibited by the country."

As he explained it, Hadorious shifted his gaze over to the contents of the glass.

“Even this drink we call the blood of the Goddess, hmm? Moreover, for it to be prohibited by law... That is quite the strict decision, but... No, is it to strive to nurture talented people?”

Hadorious admiringly muttered to no one in particular, and it looked as though he had completely forgotten that Reiji was even there. Was he that deep in thought? Seeing that Hadorious wasn't moving in the least, Reiji asked him a frank question.

“So, why did you call me here today?”

“It is nothing major. I just wanted to talk with the hero a little is all.”

“This isn't quite the atmosphere of an enjoyable conversation, however.”

“Hmph, excuse me for that.”

Just what was there to excuse? He was shameless. Ever since Reiji entered the room, the interior was filled to the brim with a tingling atmospheric static. And when Reiji coldly pointed that out, as if saying he was testing Reiji, Hadorious gave him a condescending smile and a brief apology that didn't feel the slightest bit sincere.

Reiji could sense a surplus of composure in the odds and ends of all Hadorious's actions. He was a force to be reckoned with. It was as if he was saying he personally believed there was no reason to treat Reiji, the hero, in any special manner. His plain gaze was concealing a glare, and after scrutinizing every action Reiji made, he squinted as if taking pity on the contents of his glass and posed Reiji a question.

“Hero-dono, why did you take on the subjugation of the Demon Lord?”

“To save the people of this world, but what of it?”

The reply Reiji gave was the same as what he'd said in the audience chamber to Almadious. That hadn't changed. However, as for Hadorious...

“The ones that you are trying to save are people with no relation to you whatsoever, are they not? People you would reap no benefit from saving. But even so, you're saying you intend to do exactly that?”

“What exactly are you getting at, Your Grace?”

“Nothing major. I was just wondering what the source of Hero-dono's lofty way of thinking is.”

“...?”

Just what was this man looking for within Reiji by asking him that? His question was incomprehensible, and Reiji was unable to surmise the meaning behind the almost pitying gaze pointed at him. If it had been the sharp, ambitious gaze of a falcon, then it would have

been evident he was looking for a weakness in Reiji. But no, Hadorious was speaking of ideals and goals. What was the meaning of him prying into Reiji's way of thinking?

As Reiji looked at him with a perplexed gaze, Hadorious suddenly let out a dry laugh as though he thought his own question had been uninteresting.

"Well, fine. Let me ask you once more: what kind of place is the world the hero hails from?"

"By 'what kind,' you mean...?"

"Let me see... Compare it to this world, for example. That's what I'd like to hear."

Was it alright to just compare the two worlds like that? Reiji remembered having a similar conversation in the royal castle with Almadious and the others, but...

"Compared to this world, technology in our world has advanced much further. This world may have magic, but in our world, you might say that technology has developed beyond the point that such a thing is unnecessary."

"Advancement, development... Is that it? What you said before about wine... is it also to those ends?"

"Yes."

Reiji replied honestly, and when he did, Hadorious suddenly stood up and looked towards the window. He paused for a moment, and then spoke again as he gazed outside.

"Hero-dono, what do you think of this world?"

"If I were to compare it to our world, there would be no end to it, but I do believe this is a good world."

"A good world, is it...?"

What came out of Hadorious's mouth was a somehow discouraged murmur. Reiji was uncertain what reason he had to ask such a question and what he was thinking, but Hadorious only continued in his line of questioning.

"Hero-dono, what is outside this window?"

Was this to urge him over to take a look? Reiji drew a little closer and looked at the view from the third floor. He could see the streets and the city going about its everyday business. The scene engulfed by twilight, he could see the lamps sparsely laid out in Kurant City begin to flicker, along with the houses and people they illuminated. In the distance, he could also see the shining blue and green lamps characteristic of the recreational district.

"What about it?"

"This world you see has not changed at all in the last several hundred years. Everyone sleeps and wakes up at a determined time, they do their jobs, find love, bear children, and then die. Such a cycle

continues when there is no desire for development, and even as countries rise and fall from conflict and diplomacy, the root consciousness of the people remains the same. They're stopped, never to advance."

But that was all a preamble. Hadorious then made a cold declaration.

"This has always been the Goddess's miniature garden."

Was it a statement of sadness? Grief? It was certainly true a world's development of civilization and culture was the onus of the people who lived there. It may be something that any and all desire, but forcing its development was also wrong. At least, that's what Reiji thought.

"For you who come from a developed world, do you still think that it's something good?"

"If the people can walk in peace, is that not its own way of life? Unreasonable change also brings about conflict, and even over in our world, the conflict between fellow humans is inextinguishable."

"..."

Hadorious kept silent. Reiji himself fell into thought, and Hadorious finally spoke once more.

"Though it is sudden, I would like to have you go to the Empire from here."

"What...?"

"The Empire—mainly Her Imperial Highness Graziella—has been making bold movements. I would like you to keep that in check, and have you reside in the Empire for a brief period."

Hadorious made his desire known in no uncertain terms. The way he spoke left no room for consent or refusal. It was a definite statement with no regard for how Reiji felt.

"Is that demand something that I have to listen to no matter what, I wonder?"

"Of course."

"However, I have no obligation to do so. The foremost thing I'm to be handling is the subjugation of the Demon Lord Nakshatra."

"Certainly so. However, Hero-dono, let me ask you something... Did you by chance come rushing over because Gregory talked?"

The moment he finished firing off those words, the intensity of the atmosphere filling the room changed with an audible snap. Of course, that was because Reiji's own emotions went through the roof.

"Is that... a threat?"

"Hmph. If you want to think of it that way, I do not mind. However, it is not like Gregory violated any military regulations or anything. Naturally, there is no way to judge him accordingly. Thus, your suspicions are nothing other than just that."

“Tch! Are you really gonna say something like that after using my friend as a decoy?!”

“That was nothing but casting aside the very few to save the many. It is nothing major. You can just wait regarding news of your good friend. Our investigations are progressing, after all. Whether or not he is alive, we will eventually track him down. However, there are no reports as of yet.”

With that, Hadorious scoffed as if to say the affair was but a worthless trifle.

“Though I doubt he is alive.”

“How dare you say that so shamelessly...”

Reiji’s anger had surpassed its boiling point, and even with the full extent of that directed at him, Hadorious replied bluntly.

“What? All I did was speak of the possibility.”

“Don’t you at least feel any guilt towards Suimei?”

“If I said I did, would you feel gratified?”

“Tch!”

He couldn’t forgive that sarcastic question. Clenching his jaw so hard his teeth creaked, Reiji glared at Hadorious as he let loose his wrath. He hadn’t forgotten his place and was well aware he was being rude. It was just that his anger won out over that. But even then, Hadorious spoke with an air about him like he didn’t care at all.

“Suimei Yakagi, was it? He was simply unlucky. It’s just embarrassing for you to get so angry with me over it.”

“You fu—!”

Reiji couldn’t stop at only throwing his anger out through his gaze, and channeled it into his fist. He closed in from where he was being kept in check and let a blow fly. He thought briefly just what kind of worries he’d have if he struck Hadorious, but it wasn’t anything that would stop him now. Reiji’s strike, however, was stopped by Hadorious with a single hand.

“Wha...?”

“Hmph...”

As if this was boring, Hadorious turned his gaze on Reiji.

This man...

Reiji wasn’t using his full strength. But even so, in this state where his power was explosively elevated by the divine protection of the hero summoning, for his lightning fast blow to be completely blocked without the opponent even batting an eye was unexpected. Reiji shook his captured fist violently to the side and jumped back. And with an expression like he’d reached some sort of conclusion, Hadorious once more faced the window.

“You still require diligence, I see. At this rate, the Demon Lord is far out of your reach. There is likely a need for you to accumulate all

kinds of experience and become stronger. By the way, about the matter in the Empire...”

Reiji had no choice in the matter. If he didn't go, Hadorious was implying that something would happen to Gregory.

“...I'll go. So don't lay a hand on Gregory or his family. Also, about Suimei...”

“I promise you that we will put our effort into the search. From the looks of it, your friend might actually be worth something after all.”

“You're...”

Still saying crap like that?

Though that was what Reiji wanted to say, he knew his arm was being twisted and there was nothing he could do about it. It was frustrating, but turning on his heels and silently leaving the room was the most he could do to oppose Hadorious. And just as he grabbed the knob of the door...

“Hero-dono, there is one thing that I must tell you.”

“...What is it?”

“From now on, you will likely face off against many enemies, be they humans or other races.”

Just why was he saying that? It couldn't be...

“Are you trying to say that what I asked Rajas was foolish?”

“No, that was honestly a relief.”

“What...?”

Hadorious's reply was completely out of the range of Reiji's expectations. He thought he was about to be presented with candid advice in the form of a scolding about asking a demon why he fought.

“Hero-dono, this is a different place from the world you came from. It is good to think for yourself about what is here, and have that reflect in your actions. However, when it comes to fighting demons, there is no right and wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means they are simply that kind of being. They do not assault humans and the other races for anything resembling a reason. Their very existence itself is to fulfill the purpose of a grander existence, to bring all humanity to ruin.”

“The purpose of a grander existence? Just what...”

“There is no need for you to know that as you are now. Thus, there is no meaning to that question you asked.”

And with that, Hadorious brought what he said to a close. Was that a warning, or was he remonstrating Reiji? Reiji couldn't tell in the end.

“...Are you done yet?”

“Let us see, then just one more thing.”

Just what intention did he have to pile on more words here? While gazing out the window, he fired out one more question while his expression could not be seen.

“Hero-dono, at the end of this fighting, after everything is brought to an end, what do you wish for?”

“Nothing really. I don’t need anything.”

“Status, honor, riches, women... You could have all your desires fulfilled to your heart’s content, you know?”

“Cut the crap. I don’t know what kind of intentions you have in asking me that, but I’m not fighting for any reason like that.”

“I see. Then that is the end of my questions. Until you depart for the Empire, though it will be but for a short while, do get some rest.”

Without showing any courtesy to Hadorious, who was still facing the window, Reiji left the room and headed back to the inn.

“The summoned hero, is it...?”

Hadorious watched Reiji walk along the street from the window with a somewhat sorrowful gaze, and then looked up at the sky. Gazing up at the melancholic expanse blackened by twilight, Hadorious posed a question to the hero who was no longer present.

“Hero Reiji, what do you really think of this world? Can you truly say that it’s good? This world where, because of the Goddess, all progress has stopped? This rotten world without a future...”



The library... just wasn’t there.

In the imperial capital of Filas Philia, there was a scrupulously controlled standing army that only moved under the command of the emperor. It was considered the height of military art, both in and outside of the Empire. Ordinarily, hearing a metropolis had a large standing army made the place sound rather boorish, but that was not the case with Filas Philia. It was a refined, scholarly city also known for its academics. It even boasted of a grand library superior to the other nations’. It was said to have a collection of books dating back to the founding of the nation, making it the ideal place to do a little research.

Suimei asked about it before leaving his house... But no matter how much he searched the city, he was absolutely unable to find any building like it. At this rate, it might as well have been said that he never would.

“Huh...?”

It wasn’t like Suimei had no sense of direction. It was true that he’d gotten lost in Royal Castle Camellia back in Astel once, but this was different. The layout of the city known as Filas Philia was difficult to figure out. The main roads weren’t a problem, but once he came to

the branching side streets, no matter how far or where he walked, there were nothing but residential houses. And thanks to the labyrinthine arrangement of the streets, he would always end up somewhere strange where there was no option but to turn back. It was a difficult maze to escape.

Suddenly coming to a stop, Suimei looked around. To his side was a recreational district that seemed to go on forever. And ahead of him was a residential one mostly built of vivid red bricks. What was he to do? At this rate, he'd never be able to gather information on the hero summoning.

He'd finally gotten his place set up and ready to analyze the summoning circle, but now he had this predicament to contend with. Just as he was about to cast aside his strange sense of pride and use magicka to do something about it...

"You're... in the way. Kindly... step aside already."

That familiar, charming voice. Those signature, quirky pauses. The flat tone unable to conceal the thorns of irritation in her words. Hearing it, Suimei immediately turned around. Behind him stood a girl with reddish violet twintails and an eyepatch with an elaborate ornament on it. She was wearing eccentric gothic Lolita getup despite this being a different world. Just as he thought, she was someone he remembered. Or rather, someone there was no way he could forget.

Indeed, this was no doubt the girl from the checkpoint, Liliana Zandyke. However, it seemed she was not on her own this time. In front of her stood two men in reddish brown robes with hoods. From what Suimei could see and hear, they didn't appear to be having a friendly conversation. The two men in robes spoke to Liliana as if they were admonishing an unreasonable child.

"All you have to do is relay to that father of yours what we just told you."

"You're... getting annoying. I am not... in a position to interject... in regards to the colonel's affairs."

"Surely you can manage it somehow. I'm just trying to express my desire for him to be obedient."

"Please. Don't make me... repeat myself."

The robed man was politely making some kind of request. Liliana was treating the whole thing like it was absurd, but the man showed no signs of backing down. That was when the second robed man stepped in.

"Even though we're asking so earnestly, you're saying you won't listen?"

"That's right. That's why—"

"Looks like we don't have a choice then. We'll just hafta change your mind... by force."

The two men in robes manifested mana around them, rattled off cliché threats, and took out staffs about the length of their arms. In response, without a hint of fear or surprise, Liliana simply narrowed her single eye at them.

“Knowing that I am... one of the Elite Twelve... you’d still dare... try something like this?”

“Ha! The Empire’s human weapon? Those are all just exaggerated rumors! In the end, you’re just some damn brat!”

“If you will not listen to our request, then there’s no other way. At best, you’ll be clinging to your father in tears.”

Suimei didn’t know the circumstances, but it seemed trouble was about to break out right in front of him. Frankly speaking, it looked like good-for-nothing adults picking on a young girl. Though considering Liliana’s position in the army, that wasn’t quite a fair assessment.

But she is just a kid...

After seeing this much, it would leave a bad taste in Suimei’s mouth if he just walked away. He didn’t have any obligation to lend her a hand, but he also had no reason to look the other way. Walking up to them conspicuously, Suimei called out to the group in a listless voice.

“Aaah, sorry to butt in while you’re in the middle of things here.”

“The hell’s with you?”

“You are...”

The three of them turned towards Suimei all at once. Each wore a different expression. There was the twisted sneer of a hoodlum, a blank stare of puzzlement, and a surprised look of recognition.

“Picking on a little girl in this kinda place... You guys sure have a nice hobby there.”

“The hell? You got nothing to do with this! Butt out!”

“I can’t exactly do that. I just happen to be present in this scene of your little play, you see.”

“And what ‘scene’ is that?”

“Looks like adults picking on a child to me.”

“Take it how you will, but will you still dare to interfere even after seeing these robes?”

“What? Is there something special about your ugly robes?”

The more polite of the two men had said that like Suimei should be intimidated by the way they were dressed, but whatever meaning it had was lost on Suimei. As he replied to the man’s boastful question with ridicule, his courteous tone changed to irritation in an instant.

“Y-You country bumpkin who knows naught of the special robe granted only to high-ranking members of the guild...”

As he fumed, Liliana called out to Suimei in a wary voice.

“What... are you planning?”

“Hmm? I was just passing by and caught wind of something weird going on, that’s all.”

“So you... stuck your neck in? This has... absolutely nothing... to do with you.”

And like that, Liliana spurned him. She treated him like a meddlesome nuisance, but it seemed clear that she simply didn’t want him involved. This caught the attention of the rude robed man.

“What? He someone you know?”

“No, not re—”

“Yeah, we met not too long ago and have gotten pretty close.”

“What are you—?!”

Liliana grew angry at Suimei’s shameless, barefaced lie. Without letting her see, he playfully stuck out his tongue. She’d probably meant to extricate him from the situation as an uninvolved bystander, but Suimei had already made up his mind. He was completely intent on butting in.

“I see, so you aren’t unrelated at all...”

“Then I guess we’ll hafta use a little force on you too.”

With that, the two men began building up their mana again. The polite one stuck out his staff in what Suimei assumed was a battle stance. While dejectedly grumbling to himself that the streets of the imperial capital may have been more dangerous than he thought they would be, Suimei looked away from his two opponents. He could see Liliana focus her attention on him in exasperation.

“Are you... stupid? If you had just... pretended not to know me... they would have treated you like you were uninvolved. Actually, you are uninvolved... Truly stupid.”

“Stupid? That’s mean, you know? If I just abandoned a little girl and went my way, my dreams would haunt me, and I’m not interested in that. But I have to ask... Just what is going on here?”

“It doesn’t have... anything to do with you... in the least. Stand aside. These are high-ranking masters... of the Empire’s Mage’s Guild.”

“Yeah, I’ll pass, thanks.”

And as Suimei rejected Liliana’s order...

“You think you got the leisure to just chit-chat?”

With a scornful smile, the rude robed man wove together a spell. His welling mana vanished as if called somewhere, and the parts of the spell rapidly came together. With the invocation of the Elements quickly completed, what followed was the chant.

“Oh Fire! Red Blaze!”

The chant was so short that it was essentially just the keywords. A moment later, pillars of fire took form, and as the rude man swung his arms down, the flames matched his movements. With that, it seemed

the molding of the flames had been completed, and the flames—which had taken on the shape of swords—swung down towards Liliana. He was attacking from her right side. For Liliana, who wore an eyepatch, that was her blind spot.

However, Liliana dodged the first sword by a small margin. It stuck into the ground instead, flinging fragments of flame off in several directions. This sequence of attacking and dodging repeated itself several times, and the area filled with embers and the smell of burning. Perhaps having been grazed by a sword of flame, part of Liliana's outfit was singed.

“Heh, you don't live up to your name at all, human weapon. Looks like I've got you on the run. Haha, just like I thought, all your fucking achievements are just lies, aren't they?”

“Tales of valor on the battlefield are just tales in the end. That a child like you played an active role on the battlefield is likely nothing more than such a tale fabricated by Colonel Rogue to elevate his own standing.”

Apparently taking the fact that she didn't strike back as a sign of weakness, the men threw disdainful words and accusations at Liliana. Hearing it, Liliana's presence wavered for a single instant and then turned dark and dangerous. But the men didn't seem to notice. She then called out to them in an irked tone.

“To get so conceited... over aiming for my blind spot... and only... being able to graze me...”

With those words, the men finally felt the pressure coming from Liliana. Was that what she'd intended? Suimei had been on the receiving end of that pressure before, but this wasn't as serious as it had been at the checkpoint. Was she planning on taking the upper hand here by packing the area with her mana? In a fight between magicians, the range at which one could control their mana was a big deal. If one could control their mana far enough, it was possible to obstruct the opponent's activation of magicka, after all.

“From this kind of shit...”

The rude man finally managed to utter a single curse. Wincing, the polite man beside him began chanting a spell.

“Urgh... Do not underestimate me! Oh wind, thou art...”

Wind magic. It was likely that he was completely ignoring Suimei the passerby and aiming for Liliana. With that prediction, Suimei gathered mana in his index finger and manipulated the phenomena in their surroundings.

“That fire over there... I'm just gonna borrow it for a little.”

Speaking in a casual manner like he was borrowing an eraser from a fellow classmate, Suimei gathered the surplus flames that had scattered about the area at the center of the magicka circle he

summoned in front of his finger. Even though the flames weren't Suimei's doing, they quickly gathered before him as if he were their master and converged into a pronounced red ball of fire.

"Wha... Ah! M-My flame!"

The rude man's heart sank at this sudden shocking development. Glaring at Suimei, he demanded an explanation in a surprised tone.

"Th-The hell did you do?!"

"Don't worry. Like I said, I'm just borrowing them."

"There's no way you can..."

Do that kinda crap?

While guessing what the man with the crude tone was about to say, Suimei rolled his eyes.

"You people... No matter what, you deny the mysteries right before your fucking eyes. Shouldn't you at least take half a second to *think* about it first?"

"The hell are you babbling about?! Tell me what the hell you did!"

"For the last time, damn it, I told you I'm borrowing them. Either thin out the spell or put in a little more minute control, though. If you don't, there'll be too much waste and it'll have a shitty effect."

As Suimei spat out those words, the polite man once more began weaving together his interrupted spell.

"Oh Wind, thou art—"

"Fly."

Before he could finish, Suimei shot out the gathered flames to keep him in check. It was no surprise that the polite man's wind was like a gentle breeze before Suimei's roaring fire. The air was sucked into the magickally charged flames, consuming the wind spell altogether.

When it did, Suimei took action without a moment's pause. Putting his middle finger and thumb together, he used them as a substitute for the iron sights of a firearm, and looked right through them at the arm of the polite man. With a snap, an exciting boom rang out. The man's staff was splintered to pieces by the explosion. And with his arm sent reeling back, he was wide open.

"He vani—"

The moment Suimei disappeared, the man shouted out in surprise. Suimei—who had only transformed into vapor—moved over to him in the blink of an eye, and manifested in a stance ready to deliver a strike to his solar plexus.

The hand he thrust out had already donned the gloves of discord. And as he poured mana into it, the magickal item's effect activated. His opponent felt it. The signals from the bundle of nerves located deep within the body, the nerve plexus, was scrambled, sending pain

screaming through each and every one of his nerves.

But the man himself made no noise. He had no time. He collapsed almost instantaneously from the shock and fell to the ground, eyes open and everything. Suimei then looked over to see the rude man, seemingly crushed by overpowering mana, collapsed in front of Liliana and frothing at the mouth. Verifying that everything was in order, Liliana had a single thing to say.

“Let’s... change locations.”



Leaving the men where they were, Suimei and Liliana walked off like they hadn’t had anything to do with what just happened. Reaching a place slightly removed from the upper class district, the two of them came to a stop where the bricks of the road had turned gray. Dusting off her skirt, Liliana spoke in a thorny voice like she was reluctant to even do that much.

“Seriously... This is the very definition... of unwanted meddling.”

Ignoring her irritated words, Suimei began questioning her.

“So, who were those guys?”

“It has... nothing to do... with you.”

“True.”

After being flatly denied an answer, Suimei was willing to drop it there.

“And... what were you doing there... exactly?”

“I told you I just happened to be passing by. If I remember right... Liliana, was it?”

“I do not recall... naming myself. Why do you... know my name?”

“Hmm? That’s ’cause...”

“I see... You’re one of those people... that the military police... have been rounding up a lot lately... A despicable stalker... Then you must have been here today to...”

“No, damn it. I heard it from that clerk at the checkpoint. Why am I a stalker all of a sudden?”

“I know. It was just... a little joke. There’s no way... you could stalk me.”

“You little...”

Speaking in a flat, confident tone, she closed her eye. Seeing Liliana naturally act so cool with an aloof expression on her face, Suimei’s shoulders drooped like he was tired. It was hard to tell when she was joking.

As Suimei let out a troubled sigh over Liliana’s attitude, a sudden change came over the area. The mana in their surroundings welled up, and something like a tingling poison or acid filled the air. It was different from the pressure she’d unleashed earlier, and more like

what she'd used at the checkpoint.

"It's about time... that you answer me. What have you... come here to do?"

Liliana questioned Suimei as she narrowed her sleepy eye. The backdrop of the townscape suddenly looked like it was in a heat haze to Suimei. It was as if they were standing atop burning hot asphalt. And when he didn't respond, Liliana's mana swelled even more, completely blurring their surroundings.

It was an interrogation using intimidation to force him to talk. But Suimei flashed a fearless smile as if that only riled him up. He shrugged his shoulders and replied to her in a frivolous tone.

"What's that? Are foreigners not allowed to go for walks? I went through all the proper channels to live in this country, you know?"

"We're very close... to the upper class district. If you loiter around... without any business here... of course you look suspicious... Now answer me."

"Those guys just now looked way more suspicious than I do, though."

Liliana no longer cared about what Suimei did or didn't want to tell her. If he remembered right, she was a second lieutenant. As a soldier, this type of questioning was likely part of her regular duties. Suimei was largely unconvinced by all this, but he decided to capitulate for now. He didn't really have a need to be obstinate about it, so in a complete change from his previously frivolous attitude, he answered her honestly.

"I'm looking for the library. That big one this place is so famous for."

"The... Imperial University Library?"

"There's a little something I want to look into. Look, it should be here..."

Suimei showed Liliana the hand-drawn map he'd gotten from Jillbert.

"Why are you acting... like you're going to have me explain it? Don't act... so familiar."

"It's not a big deal, right? Just tell me. I'll buy you some sweets if you do."

"No thank you. Please don't treat me... like a child. Also... your map is wrong."

"Huh..."

Despite sounding like she had no intention to help him, she pointed that much out to him. It seemed she was at least a little nice underneath it all. But what was wrong about it? Suimei frowned, and Liliana looked over the map once more.

"Yes... It's quite wrong."

“...That damn legal delinquent loli. Fucking lying to me...”

The head of the ward for the district Suimei lived in was Jillbert Griga. She seemed to get along with Lefille. Whenever she had time, she would come to their house to play with her, though she was always quite rude to Suimei. But when he'd mentioned he was going to the library earlier today, she offered to draw him a map and eagerly got to work. It appeared this little trick was what she'd really been up to. Jillbert came off as quite frank and upfront, but after opening the lid and looking inside, it seemed she was a bit twisted.

“Four of the streets... are wrong.”

“Seriously?”

After Liliana informed him of such, Suimei could only sigh and curse Jillbert in his head.

“Umm, sooo, how do I get there from here?”

“As I said... don't just—”

“Okay, okay. I'll throw in three more sweets. That should do it, right?”

“Why are you... trying to tempt me... with sweets?”

“Do you not like sweets? Would toys or something be better?”

“Y-You're seriously...”

Realizing that Suimei wasn't listening to her at all, Liliana began trembling slightly. Perhaps sensing her anger was useless, however, she let out a deliberately loud sigh as if announcing Suimei's victory in twisting her arm.

“Fine... I'll guide you... so please follow me.”

“Sorry 'bout that. I'll buy you some sweets though, so take that as an apology.”

“I don't want any. And when we're done here... get away from me... immediately.”



From there, Suimei followed Liliana down the road. She looked behind her every now and then, and made small talk with him as they walked along. She was a girl with a curt attitude and a dangerous air about her, but...

“One way or another, she's kind, huh?”

“Did you say something?”

“Nope, nothing... So, Liliana, what were you doing in that kinda place? It wasn't like you went there to pick a fight, right?”

“Patrol.”

As she guided him to the library—though he couldn't tell if she was happy about doing so or not—Suimei took the opportunity to interrogate her. She gave a terse answer, which Suimei immediately called into question.

“You’re quite passionate about work, huh? But isn’t that kinda thing the job of the military police?”

“I’m surprised... you know that. That is... certainly the case. However... lately there has been an incident... kicking up a fuss in the imperial capital... so they are shorthanded.”

“Ah, if I recall, something about people ending up in a coma, right?”

“That’s right. If you don’t want to get involved too... make sure not to walk around on your own... in that kind of place.”

When she said that, Suimei tried tossing out a theory he’d concocted on the spot.

“Which means... the incidents have been happening around the upper class district, huh?”

“...”

“What? Not gonna answer me?”

She didn’t. She kept silent and kept walking. Did she have a reason to be apprehensive about this subject? Even though she’d been turning to look back at him frequently up until now, she stopped doing so and just looked forward. Surely his random guesswork hadn’t hit the nail on the head... had it? As Suimei was wondering how bad it was to stab a bullseye in the dark like that in front of someone who knew about the investigation and trying to think of ways to smooth it over, Liliana threw him a bit of a curveball.

“...I have something I want to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Are you not... scared of me?”

She had her head turned ever so slightly towards him now, and was looking at him with her trademark stare.

“Huh? Ah... Not really? But why are you asking about that all of a sudden?”

“You... keep starting conversations with me... even though I threatened you. Other people... would just freeze in fear... or, like the people from before, fight back. So... why is that?”

“Like I’d get the jitters from just a little pressure like that. Besides, you’re younger than me, right? Like hell I’d embarrass myself like that.”

If someone was endowed with great mana, their ability to dominate an area was equally powerful. And when a mage dominates an area, all within it becomes a target. Being under the effects of such domination can have an effect on the psyche. So when a mage wants to overwhelm an opponent, filling the area with their mana was the most efficient method of doing so. But if Suimei cowered every time someone tried that on him, he’d never get anything done. Liliana’s mana was certainly quite powerful, but Suimei was no ordinary mage.

“...Is that so? You are... unusual.”

Liliana faced forward again in a huff. It was certainly true that there were those who found her appearance foreboding. Her title as a soldier was also something that invited the nervousness in the general populace. Considering how she presented herself, it was no wonder people shied away from her.

“So you’re aware that you give off a prickly aura, huh?”

“Well, to an extent. However... I was taught by my direct superior... that such a thing... is necessary for a soldier. Since I possess techniques for combat... I have to be a symbol of fear... he said.”

Suimei let out a sigh. Averting his gaze from her, he looked up at the sky and gave an exasperated reply.

“Liar.”

“...”

“Isn’t that right? The reason you pressure your surroundings isn’t to overwhelm your enemies, it’s to protect yourself. It’s a way of keeping vigilant. Am I wrong?”

“Why... do you think that?”

“You keep your distance with no reason, and react to even the most trivial change in your surroundings. In both what you say and do. Just like at the checkpoint, you jump to trying to dominate other people... Other than that, call it a hunch.”

“...”

“You’re trying not to let others close to you, but in the end, it’s like a dog barking at people. So why do you unleash that murderous intent on people? I mean, I get those guys from earlier, but it’s not like you’ve only got enemies around you, right?”

As he asked Liliana that, they turned a corner and came across an overblown store that had a signboard out front with a slogan on it meant to stimulate the appetite of passersby. There were children nearby playing around with a ball. They stopped, however, and turned towards Suimei and Liliana like herbivores sensing a predator. They then scattered and ran in all directions. Liliana tossed a glance at Suimei.

“I don’t need... to say it, do I? If there’s anything else to say... it’s that I’m a soldier... and that you’re a citizen. There is nothing more... and nothing less than that.”

“I thought it’d be easier if you just acted normally, but... It’s none of my business, huh? Sorry.”

Suimei apologized for butting in too much into her personal matters. Liliana then quietly muttered a single word.

“...Name.”

“Hmm?”

“Your name. I don’t know... what your name is. It’s unfair for only

you to know my name... so inform me promptly.”

Suimei thought back on it and realized she was right. He’d never told her.

“It’s Suimei Yakagi.”

“Shiumay Hakagee.”

“...”

“...What is it, Shiumay?”

“No, no. Suimei Yakagi.”

“Shu... S... Suimei Yakagi. Like that?”

Suimei nodded. She at least got the pronunciation right. As Suimei expected, she then offered a comment about how unusual his name was, and he could only smile wryly in response. After Suimei finally introduced himself, a man wearing a military uniform appeared from around the street corner. With black, swept-back hair dotted with gray strands, he looked to be in the true prime of his manhood. He had a sword at his waist, and his sharp uniform had not a single wrinkle on it.

Suimei recognized this man. He’d passed by him on his way out of the church, and Lefille had judged him to be quite strong. When Liliana’s eye fell on him, as if her body was bound by strings of tension, she stiffened up with a snap. Was he someone she knew? When the man’s gaze fell on Liliana, his stern brow wrinkled slightly, and he walked right up to her.

“Liliana. What are you doing here?”

“Colonel...”

Suimei’s prediction was right on the mark. When Liliana responded, she sounded somewhat surprised. She was so tense, in fact, that she couldn’t even get out the rest of her reply.

“Answer me, Liliana.”

“I-I have been investigating... the matter from before... in this area.”

“The matter from before? You needn’t bother. That’s something other people can handle.”

“But still...”

“All you have to do is listen to what I have to say. Refrain from anything unnecessary aside from your military duties, and just be obedient.”

“...Yes.”

A sharp gaze pierced through Liliana, and the man she’d called “Colonel” doled out strict words. In response to his high-handed manner of speaking like he was rebuking her, Liliana’s shoulders strikingly drooped. Her crestfallen expression conveyed the pain she felt at having incurred this man’s displeasure. However, the man’s words and tone were certainly—

“And you are? Why are you together with Liliana?”

“Huh? Oh, I was having her guide me to the Imperial University Library. I can’t seem to get my bearings around here, so I got a bit lost and asked her for help.”

“I...”

“Are you not from the imperial capital?”

“I only recently arrived here.”

After Suimei’s brief reply, the man scrutinized him from head to toe and then closed his eyes. Was he trying to identify something suspicious or threatening in him? Perhaps having realized there was nothing of the sort, he let out a breath as if laughing at himself. He then spoke again in his ever-calm voice.

“I see. In the current state of affairs, I cannot say that public order in the imperial capital is good right now. This also applies when going to places you’re unfamiliar with, but do be sure not to walk around too much at night on your own.”

“Thank you kindly for the advice. I appreciate it.”

“Also, to reach the Imperial University Library, go straight down this path, turn left when you come to the end of the street, and you should see it from there.”

He was telling Suimei to go on his own from here. In response to the calm, authoritative man, Suimei bowed his head and thanked him once more like he was a teacher. The man then turned to Liliana and uttered a simple, two-word command.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

She obediently followed behind the man. As if emulating him, she turned her back to Suimei at the same time he did. They took a narrow road, and their two figures vanished within the shadows. Their presence eventually also vanished like dissipating smoke.

“Crap, I missed my chance to get the sweets...”

Suimei realized that after standing there for a while. However, since they both lived in the imperial capital now, there was a good chance they’d run into each other again sometime. Though she wasn’t there to hear it, he promised he’d repay the debt when he got a chance.

Liliana used the word “investigation” when she was talking to the colonel. It seemed she wasn’t actually on patrol after all. He had other question about their exchange, but in the end, it had nothing to do with him.

“Well, whatever. I suppose I’ll be about my business as well...”



“That ate up a good bit of time, huh?”

After finishing his preliminary research at the Imperial University Library and walking back outside, Suimei rotated his stiff shoulders and cracked his neck to the sides. The interior of the library was quite vast, worthy of the title of largest in the Empire, and even the surrounding nations. It also had quite an expansive collection. After getting there so late in the day, all Suimei had really been able to do was find the shelves where the relevant material was located. While thinking that he'd have to prepare magickal items and such for the next time he came, Suimei looked up.

The sky was already dark. The infinite blackness that seemed like it could suck you in held a waxing moon shining brightly on the horizon, implicitly telling him that it was well past the time to go home. Suimei then heard the sound of the front door to the library opening behind him.

"Excuse me—Oh, is that you, Yakagi-kun?"

"Ah, Mr. Librarian."

The man who emerged from the library was the one who'd shown Suimei around the library that day, an elf named Romeon. He was dressed in the library staff uniform, and did indeed have long ears.

"Thank you very much for your help today."

"Don't mention it. It hasn't been that long since I started working here myself, so it was a nice refresher to show someone around."

Romeon spoke humbly, and Suimei replied in a cheerful manner.

"Despite that, you sure managed to do it quite smoothly."

"I am an elf, after all. I have some confidence in my memory."

Romeon tapped his forehead with his index finger as he spoke. Was he implying elves were known for their memory in this world? Certainly, as a long-lived species—especially compared to humans—the ability to store and retrieve memories was quite important.

After chatting for a bit with Suimei, Romeon excused himself and went on his way. As for Suimei, he was planning on returning home. Though that was his intention, he still didn't know the area very well. All he could do was retrace the path he'd followed to get there. But as he arrived at the upper class district, he noticed it.

"Hmm?"

He realized it while he was walking along that there wasn't any light in the space directly in front of him. It was as if there was a boundary separating the city blocks. The beautiful townscape of the district that should only be a few steps in front of him was plunged into a gloomy darkness. It was unnatural. When he left the library, he'd observed a waxing moon in the sky. This wasn't like the modern world where skyscrapers could cover the sky, and no clouds had rolled in. Yet despite there being nothing to obstruct the light, it was impossibly pitch black. Moreover, he could sense the slight presence

of mana. Which meant...

*A barrier? No, this world shouldn't have the concept of barriers, so...
Hmm. Did they weaken all the light in that space to create a pseudo-darkness, or did they create a primary factor that could absorb light...?*

While vigilantly surveying his surroundings, Suimei searched for the existence of a spell, the alteration of events, and the presence or absence of the mystical. And as expected, the unnatural darkness was something created by magic. The upper class district was magically cloaked in darkness before dawn—No, it was darker than that. Just what was going on? It reeked of trouble.

“H-Help! Help me...”

“Huh?”

Suimei realized that, from within the darkness in front of him, someone was begging for help while running. The short gasps between their words made it clear they'd been running for quite some time and were nearing their limit, but... What was going on?

“You there! Please! Help me!”

“U-Uh, I don't mind, but what's going on?”

As Suimei responded, perhaps because the man's feet had become tangled, he violently pitched forward and tumbled over.

“Are you alright?”

Suimei held his hand out to man, but as if to say there was something more important than getting up, he immediately turned and pointed behind him.

“That! That over there...”

“That?”

When Suimei asked for more clarification, he sensed an omen of dense mana. Because it was drawing nearer, the portions of it that could not be concealed in the depths of the darkness were gradually revealing themselves. And then instantly, as if a portion of the darkness were cut open, a short figure wearing an inky, pitch black robe stepped out of it.

“Eek! Eeeeeek!”

“...”

The shadow wearing a black robe with a hood hanging low over their eyes didn't say a word. All they did was stare fixedly at the man who was trembling and screaming pathetically. Suimei didn't have a clue as to what was really going on, but while supporting the man who was cowering on the brick street, Suimei sharply narrowed his suspicious gaze and scrutinized the shadow.

Could this be the guy?

The idea suddenly crossed Suimei's mind. Perhaps this was the culprit behind the coma incidents that were sending the imperial capital into panic. Considering the circumstances, it seemed a very

real possibility. As he considered stepping in, the tension of battle filled Suimei's body. However, the shadow seemed to have lost interest, and vanished into the darkness.

"I-I'm saved..."

"Just what was that...?"

Exhausted of all his strength, the man who was on all fours in front of Suimei rejoiced in the shadow's departure. If this man was its goal, had it fallen back because someone else had coincidentally entered the picture? With the evidence he had, Suimei came to a conclusion about the events that had just occurred.

"...Hmm?"

And while he was surmising the current state of affairs, he spotted a familiar figure running towards him with terrifying vigor. They were running without even keeping an eye on their surroundings—they were only looking straight ahead at him. Their expression was just like that of a lost child who, after great pains, had finally found their parent. And as for the identity of said parent...

"SUIMEI-DONOOOOOOOOOO!"

"M-Menia?"

The genius mage of Astel, Felmenia Stingray. The girl who bore the title of White Flame. She was charging right for Suimei while spewing tears and other less sightly fluids from her face. She made a mad leap for him.

"Your... Your Menia has at long last arrived, Suimei-donoooooooooooo!"

"Hey, idiot! Wipe your face first! Mainly the snot! Aaaaaaaaah, it's getting on my clothes!"

"SUIMEI-DONOOOOO!"

The darkness vanished, and as the moonlight once more began shining down on the imperial capital at night, Suimei was reunited with Astel's genius mage, Felmenia Stingray.





After wiping off her face, Felmenia and Suimei were now headed towards Suimei's home base in the Empire. The man who'd been begging for his life seemed to be a noble, and when Suimei tried to ask about what happened, he was told it "wasn't anything of his plebeian concern." He'd then left, still cursing and complaining about the shadow. As for the other one...

"Hmhmmmmhmm!"

On the streets of the imperial capital bathed in faint moonlight, starlight, and the sporadic lamplight of houses, Felmenia was walking next to Suimei with a tremendous smile on her face. Just what was she so happy about? Her broad, dopey smile was a testament to her unusually high spirits. Suimei tried asking her a question.

"So, Menia, what were you doing in that kinda place?"

"You see, after arriving in the Empire, I used wind magic to search for you, Suimei-dono. But along the way, I ended up going astray in that strange place..."

So she'd ended up entering the darkness that obscured a person's vision and other senses. Suimei figured it would be easy enough to do if she was concentrating on trying to find him. But he couldn't figure out how that led to the waterworks. Of course, he had the completely wrong idea about why she was crying.

"So, that's one thing, but... Why did you come to me?"

"Why, you ask...? Did I not say I would before you departed from Astel?!"

When she said it, it did ring a bell for Suimei. If he remembered right, back when they parted at the castle, she'd said something about following after him without fail, but...

"Yeah, well, I didn't think you would really come. I completely thought you were joking."

When Suimei informed her that he hadn't taken her seriously, Felmenia mistakenly took his words the worst possible way. Her expression turned grave.

"W-Was it wrong of me to follow you?"

"No, it's not like it's wrong or anything. But Menia, you have your own life don't you? Your job and stuff."

"What are you saying? Suimei-dono, I know you were informed that I was relieved of my post as a court mage."

"Wait, that was serious? I totally thought that was just to corner that old fart of a court mage, but... That king really knows how to pull a stunt, huh? But... so that means..."

"Yes! His Majesty told me to come and assist you, Suimei-dono!"

“I bet he did...”

Almadious's face popped up in Suimei's mind as he looked at the night sky. He let out a complex, weighty sigh. Next to him, Felmenia was nodding her head repeatedly in a delighted manner, which confirmed his suspicions—she hadn't followed after him unwillingly.

Now then, King Almadious had let loose the mage said to be the best in all Astel, and sent her after Suimei, who was acting for nobody's sake in particular. Just what did he gain from doing so? Even if he assigned Felmenia to the boy who wouldn't participate in the Demon Lord's subjugation and was only trying to find a way to return to his own world, there was really nothing the king stood to gain from it.

No, the king knew that Suimei was a magician. If he also knew full well that, though only for a brief time, Felmenia had been learning the basics of magicka while Suimei was at the royal castle, then it wasn't unreasonable to think he'd sent Felmenia to learn more of Suimei's magic for the benefit of their country.

“Is something the matter, Suimei-dono? Could it be that there is something stuck to my face?”

The person in question, however, didn't know that Suimei was thinking of such things, and innocently cocked her head to the side. It was an expression that made him think that she couldn't possibly be scheming to assist him just to exploit his power.

Well, it's not something to distrust her over, really. She's probably not up to anything like that anyway.

Coming to that conclusion, Suimei pushed his doubts out of his mind. It was second nature for magicians to wonder what was going on behind the scenes, and even further beyond that. But it could also lead to unpleasantries. Especially in situations like this. This girl had genuinely come to aid him, and Suimei's first response was to regard her with skepticism.

I'm pretty terrible, aren't I...?

Felmenia was serious about helping him. Looking at her expression, he could tell. And the more he became sure of it, the more guilty he began to feel. This girl was one of his few acquaintances who knew that he was a magician. He should have been grateful for her company and welcomed it.

“...Okay. I guess that means we'll be working together again.”

“Yes!”

When Suimei finally acknowledged what she'd said, Felmenia responded with an enthusiastic burst of energy. Seeing her act like that, a single thought came to mind.

“Menia, I know the answer already, but... You're not hiding dog ears and a tail somewhere, are you?”

“Ears and tail? Why, no... I am not a therianthrope, after all.”

“Yeah, I thought so. I just... had to ask.”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. Just forget about it.”

“H-Huh...?”

Brushing off Felmenia and her puzzled expression, Suimei hurried just a little ahead of her. She hustled right behind him, taking what seemed like her rightful place next to him with a broad smile on her face as she walked along once more.

“...So puppy-like...”

He couldn’t help thinking it.



After reuniting in the upper class district, Suimei and Felmenia made their way to the back alley where Suimei’s base was located in Filas Philia.

“So this is the house you’re living in, Suimei-dono?”

“Yeah. I just bought it quite recently. By all means, come in.”

Opening the door to the house, Suimei invited her in. He casually scanned for presences within the house. Lefille was the only one that registered. It seemed Jillbert had already gone home. It looked like he’d have to wait until next time before he could give her a piece of his mind. When he remembered the little matter of her map, his expression turned stormy. And just then, his housemate showed up at the entrance.

“Welcome home, Suimei-kun.”

“Ah, yeah, good to be back.”

With a little wave, Lefille welcomed him home. Realizing it had been a long time since anyone greeted him like that, Suimei felt touched. Had it been since his father passed away? Suimei closed his eyes, and when he opened them after a short while, he realized the two unfamiliar girls were staring at each other in puzzlement.

“Um, Suimei-dono, who is this child...?”

“Suimei-kun, is that girl an acquaintance? Could you introduce me to her?”

“Ah, that’s right. So, first up, this is the mage who summoned me to this world, former court mage of the Kingdom of Astel, Felmenia Stingray. She went out of her way to come all the way here from Metel to lend me a hand.”

As Suimei first introduced Felmenia to Lefille, something about it seemed to ring a bell with Lefille. Her eyes opened wide in amazement.

“Oooh, so you are the one celebrated in Astel as the White Flame, Felmenia Stingray-dono?!”

Felmenia nodded. Suimei then briefly introduced Lefille to Felmenia.

"This is Lefille Grakis. On the way to Nelferia, fate brought us together, and she's been my traveling companion since."

"A companion... you say?"

Felmenia was slightly perplexed. Having a small child as a traveling companion didn't make sense to her.

"Well, all sorts of things happened..."

With that, Suimei decided to leave the full introduction for when Lefille returned to her original form.

"I'm Lefille Grakis. A pleasure to meet you. Please just call me Lefille."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too."

And with that, the two girls shared a friendly handshake. Felmenia then turned to Suimei.

"Suimei-dono, Lefille is quite... How do I put it? She seems to be quite refined. Is she perhaps..."

"Ah, so you can tell? It's true that Lefille is a little mistress from a well-off place."

"As I thought. I gathered as much from the odds and ends of her conduct. I can tell she's one with a noble lineage."

As Felmenia smiled at Lefille, perhaps taking into account that she was now tiny, Lefille replied with a nervous face in a somewhat reserved manner.

"Yes, but if I'm not mistaken, you're also a noble. There's no need for you to speak in such a modest way..."

"No, I am guessing that you are someone of high standing from another nation. So even as the daughter of a noble, I'm pleased to be in such good company and treat you as you deserve. You have nothing to worry about."

Now that he thought about it, other than to the servants, palace guards, and her enemies, Suimei realized that Felmenia had always been particularly courteous. Her way of speaking just now was kind of like an extension of that. She was being obligingly polite with a small child. And while Suimei was contemplating such subtleties in her tone, Felmenia looked at him with a passionate gaze.

"Then, from tomorrow on, I will be in your care here, so please do treat me well."

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

But it wasn't Suimei who shouted. Felmenia was referencing the conversation she'd had with Suimei on their way to the house, which apparently came as a great shock to Lefille.

"Something up?"

"Lady Felmenia just said that she will be living together with us..."

Is that true, Suimei-kun?!”

“Well, yeah. That’s kinda what a base is for, right? Besides, there are still plenty of free rooms.”

Lefille dejectedly slumped her shoulders as if this was terrible news.

“...And here I thought I was finally going to be able to be alone with Suimei-kun...”

“...?”

Suimei couldn’t hear Lefille’s quiet mumbling, and he couldn’t understand what she was upset about. Shrugging it off, he moved on to the next topic at hand: Felmenia’s room.

“And so, Menia’s room will be...”

“Wha—?!”

Lefille once more raised her voice in abject surprise as she pointed a trembling finger at Suimei. Had she seen a ghost? Her shocked expression would have made it easy to believe. Just what was going on with her? Suimei gave her a puzzled look.

“What’s up?”

“What did you just say, Suimei-kun?!”

“...What’s up?”

“Before that!”

“Before that? I was talking about Menia’s room.”

He couldn’t imagine what in that had shocked her. She looked like she was on the verge of crisis. However, she managed to calm herself, clear her throat out in a way that didn’t suit her small body, and start over with her inquiry.

“Suimei-kun. Do you, um... often refer to her in that way?”

“Yeah?”

Still perplexed, Suimei answered her honestly, and Lefille’s countenance turned bitter.

“Really...? Tch.”

“Is something wrong with that?”

“S-Something? No, everything! All of it!”

A yell came back in response to Suimei’s question. Even though it wasn’t like she was doing intense exercise, she was gasping like she was out of breath. Lefille looked like she was at her wit’s end. But once again, she calmed herself, and then seemed to contemplate something for a spell. She paced like a detective or sleuth from a crime drama working out a mystery. Eventually seeming to arrive at an answer, she raised her face with a snap.

“Alright, Suimei-kun, from today on, please call me Lefi.”

“Huh, what? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter! Starting today, you will also call me by my pet name! Got it? Starting this very moment, effective immediately, you’ll

call me Lefi!”

She thrust out her index finger emphatically towards Suimei. Overpowered by her intense presence like a fierce god's, despite faltering, Suimei consented.

“O-Okay... That's fine and all, but...”

“Then, um... Come on, Suimei-kun.”

She looked at him with expectant eyes as if commanding him to say it.

“U-Uh... Lefi?”

“...”

“Hey, what's wrong?”

“Mm... Alright, not bad. Actually, it's pretty good.”

With her eyes cast down as she said that, Lefille nodded repeatedly. And when she raised her head, what Suimei could see was a completely satisfied and unabashed look of joy. Meanwhile, having watched that exchange from beginning to end, Felmenia looked like she was staring a hole through the floor, and then looked up at the ceiling next. Just what was she thinking about? The up and down process repeated for a bit, and then she seemed to reach a conclusion on something.

“It couldn't be...”

“This time it's Menia...? What's up?”

However, Felmenia didn't reply to Suimei. Instead, she knelt down to Lefille's eye level and put her hands on her shoulders.

“This sort of thing is no good. It is still too early for you.”

“I-It's not too early! No, actually... Isn't this a late start?!”

Though Suimei was lost as to what Felmenia was talking about, Lefille seemed to understand. She began bawling as if Felmenia's words were devastating.

“I don't really get what's going on here, but... about the room assignments...”

Watching the two girls sink deeper into their bog, Suimei tried to cut in. Perhaps having remembered something, Felmenia vehemently turned towards him.

“Come to think of it, there is something that I would like to ask you about, Suimei-dono!”



“Hahh, like I thought, I didn't finish him off. How pathetic...”

What Felmenia ended up asking him about was about the battle with Rajas. She told the story of what happened, and they'd just finished going over the details. Suimei twirled around his finger as he pushed it into his temple.

“So Rajas is no more?”

“Yes. He took a strike from Reiji-dono, and after that, a pale lightning burst out of his body. He was completely burned away by it and left not a trace...”

“Yeah, that’s how that spell works.”

“No less from Suimei-dono, I’m sure.”

Felmenia reveled in admiration, but Suimei apologized for causing them trouble. It was just as he’d suspected. However, for Rajas to also hold on for nearly a week, he really was terrifyingly sturdy. Even if Suimei had faced off against him without first taking on an army of ten thousand, he probably wouldn’t have gotten by with ordinary means. While Suimei was pondering that, Lefille was making a stern face in the seat next to him. She then began muttering in a slightly angry voice.

“Lucas de Hadorious...”

Lefille repeated the name of the noble that Felmenia had spoken of. She scoffed in irritation at the man in question who’d ensnared Suimei and the trade corps just to buy time.

“So the reason those demons appeared in the first place is because of that man...”

“Yes, I’m afraid. As a citizen of Astel, I offer my sincere apologies for his actions.”

“No, it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Suimei’s, either.”

Lefille tried to encourage the two of them, who were both making bitter expressions. Suimei then resolutely thrust out his fist.

“I’ll have to properly thank that son of a bitch later.”

“Indeed. I believe I will as well.”

Though still in her childlike body, Lefille had a terrifying presence about her. The anger she felt towards Hadorious likely exceeded even Suimei’s. She lost the first good friends she’d gotten close with since losing everyone. That searing pain couldn’t be expressed in just words. And as she and Suimei let the flames of retribution burn in their eyes, Felmenia took out her baggage in a fluster. Just what was she up to?

“Also, I have something that I must show you, Suimei-dono.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Here, take this.”

With that, Felmenia presented an old tome to him. On its spine, “A Study of the Hero Summoning Ritual and the History of the Summoned Heroes” was scribed in stunning calligraphy.

“Where... did you get this?”

“While organizing documents before I left, I found it in the castle library and brought it with me.”

“I see. I meant to look through there from top to bottom, but to think I overlooked this...”

“I have not yet confirmed the contents myself, but how about it?”

“It’s a detailed report on the hero summoning ritual, and looks like someone’s personal research on it.”

“Do you think it will be of use?”

“Yeah, looks like it’ll be a good reference. Thanks.”

“No, it’s hardly something you need thank me for...”

Though she said that, Felmenia looked both moved and extremely happy that Suimei had thanked her personally. Looking at them from the side with a somewhat envious expression, Lefille was sourly grumbling. She seemed to think Felmenia had stolen a march on her. Since Suimei was engrossed in the book, he didn’t see or hear any of this, which could only be said to be karma.

As he continued to read, Lefille seemed to realize something and changed her tone completely. She went from fuming to pouting, and asked Suimei a question in a diffident manner as she hung her head low.

“Um... Suimei-kun... Like I thought, do you want to go back?”

“Well, yeah.”

While skimming the book without looking up, Suimei gave a half-aware reply. He was almost completely absorbed in what he was reading.

“!”

“?! ”

Both Felmenia and Lefille’s shoulders jumped up with a twitch. They then both cast their eyes solemnly downward.

“As expected, I suppose...”

“Yes, that’s just how it is...”

“Huh? Uh... What’s with you two?”

Just what had come over the two girls? In the section of the room that should have been bright thanks to the light from a magickal lamp, it looked like someone had put up blackout curtains for a moment. But there was nothing wrong with the lamp. When Suimei finally looked over, there was a looming atmosphere of grief swirling in the room. It was as if an awfully heavy weight was pushing down on the two girls so hard that he could almost hear a dramatic sound effect to go with it.

“Nothing, it’s nothing...”

“Waaah... Z-Zuimi-dono ith going awaaaay...”

“H-Hey... Hey, you two!”

Suimei wouldn’t make it all the way through the book, because he now had his hands full soothing his two housemates.

Chapter 3: The Second Hero, Elliot

More so than Suimei expected, Felmenia and Lefille seemed to get along well. As was evidenced by their first meeting, both of them were polite, diligent girls with a strong sense of justice. Both the way they thought and their general dispositions were quite similar, so they had a great deal in common and it didn't take much time at all for them to open their hearts to one another.

And since there wasn't a single spark flying between them, Suimei had absolutely no worry about them living with and being around each other. And fortuitously for Lefille, her new friend was someone who was well versed in the magic of this world. Lefille was somewhat vexed that she couldn't attend the Magic Institute as she was, so getting lessons from Felmenia was a nice substitute for the time being.

It was just that, sometimes, it looked like she was restraining Felmenia. Suimei was sure it was just his imagination, so he didn't pay it any mind. Two days after Felmenia came into town, the three of them visited the local branch of the Adventurer's Guild known as the Twilight Pavilion.

Suimei and Lefille hadn't been by a guild office since they'd repelled Rajas, so they were planning on checking in to report and to apply for activities within the Empire. And after providing the female receptionist with a somewhat sanitized version of what occurred with Rajas and the demons, they were just about finished with putting all the formalities in order.

"...I understand. Thank you for your work. Even our branch has heard of the matter in Astel. It's regrettable about the trade corps and the members who were accompanying them..."

"It certainly is. I'd also like to apologize for providing the report so late."

With that, Suimei bowed his head to the receptionist. The matter with Rajas had weighed on him quite heavily. He'd withdrawn from the trade corps commission halfway through, but since all the other members had lost their lives, he felt like the least he could do was make a proper report on the incident. With the situation he'd found himself in, however, he'd been completely waylaid in checking in until now. But with this, a load had finally been taken off his shoulders.

"That's not necessary. It doesn't sound like there's anything else

that could have been done. We're just glad to see that you've arrived here safely. And regarding that, Yakagi-san, our support for you has been rather frugal, so do let us know if you require anything."

"Thank you very much."

After thanking the Twilight Pavilion receptionist who'd offered to help out with anything he might need hereafter, Suimei returned to the table where Felmenia and Lefille were waiting. Lefille was gulping down some grape juice from a porcelain cup she was holding with both hands, and Felmenia was looking around at the interior of the building in her usual rather composed fashion. Giving them a salute and letting them know that all the formalities had been taken care of, Suimei sat down at the table with them. Felmenia immediately looked at him with a question.

"Was that alright?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

Suimei strained his face as if his nose was blocked up and asked for clarification. Lefille explained in Felmenia's stead.

"Regarding the report you made just now... We could hear you from here, and you talked about the events in more detail than we thought you would. With that much information, you know it'll end up reaching this Hadorious or whoever, right? Wouldn't that be disadvantageous for us?"

"I wonder... From what I've heard, the reason he used me as a decoy in the first place was because it was part of a some grand plan, right? It wasn't like he was out to kill me off or anything, though he probably didn't even spare a single thought about my safety," said Suimei.

"That is certainly true. If not for the matter with Rajas, I do not think that Duke Hadorious would have resorted to such means. He probably only sees you as a good friend of the hero who possesses absolutely no power," agreed Felmenia.

"I see. Still... keeping him in the dark could only benefit us. If our opponent is unaware of us and our whereabouts, then he can't make a move on us, you see. In short, being overly forthcoming on our part very well may be a misstep," Lefille explained as she set aside her cup.

Certainly the position they were in right now was advantageous. Unlike here in the Empire, they had used fake names when visiting Kurant City, so it was likely that Hadorious wasn't even aware that Suimei was still alive. And if they kept things that way, he couldn't use them anymore. What Lefille was suggesting, then, was that Suimei had essentially cut his throat with his own tongue by saying too much. Suimei, however, knew the risks and had only acted after considering the potential outcomes on a scale.

"If this is going to go one way or another, I'd rather he just go

ahead and make a move. If he does, then it's an open invitation for us to bite back, after all. So if he's gonna mess with me, then I would kindly invite him to come at me already."

After making that fearless declaration, he tacked on that they'd be able to get a better read on Hadorious if he came after them, and with that, concluded his point. Lefille then added her own two cents.

"How unexpected. To think you were that inclined towards conflict..."

"This Hadorious guy is a noble who's willing to drag in innocent bystanders and use them as cannon fodder. If he's shameless enough to even nonchalantly use 'the good friend of the hero,' then if things got serious, he would probably use Reiji and the others too. No matter what his true motives were, he's not someone we can just leave at large for long."

"It is fine if we can somehow keep him in check from here, but Duke Hadorious is a difficult opponent to make a move on even for His Majesty..."

"Well, that's feudalism for you. What are you gonna do? And besides, I'm not interested in staying indebted to the king, either."

Acknowledging what a difficult problem it was, Suimei let out a grand sigh and brought that conversation to a close. He then began consulting the two girls on what to do next. As they were talking, a clear, beautiful voice called out to them.

"Excuse me, you three... Could I bother you for a moment?"

"You mean us?"

"Yeah."

Suimei turned around as he replied, and he was met with the very definition of a beautiful boy. Blond hair, blue eyes, delicate skin. He looked like he could be from Northern Europe, but his complexion wasn't quite pale enough. Nevertheless, he was very sexy. He had a different allure than Reiji, a man who the word "pretty" described quite aptly. This boy appeared to be about Suimei's age, and his clothes had something of a foreign look to them. They were a bit different from what most of the people in the Empire wore.

Collecting his thoughts on his first impression of this young man, Suimei suddenly realized that everyone within the building was astir. If he had to guess, he would have wagered it was because this young man was talking to them.

"Sorry for the sudden intrusion. My name is Elliot Austin. As for my identity... Though it's a little strange for me to say so myself, if I said I was a hero, would you understand?"

When the young man introduced himself, everyone at Suimei's table joined the stir that had come over the guild hall...

"And over here is the priest from the Church of Salvation who is

accompanying me.”

“I am called Christa.”

When Elliot introduced her, the young woman who was standing just behind him and to the side took off her hood, gracefully lifted the sides of her skirt, and curtsied politely. She had green braids hanging down over her shoulders, and an unchanging, sullen, stiff expression on her face. She was a young woman who appeared to be quite high strung. Elliot then shifted his gaze to Lefille. And upon realizing she had his attention, she looked quite surprised.

“By the look on your face, it seems that you have an idea as to what’s going on.”

“It couldn’t be... Did you also receive an oracle?”

Trembling in shock, Lefille’s voice faltered as she squeezed those words out. Elliot smiled at her and replied in a refreshing tone.

“That’s right. I received an oracle from the Goddess Alshuna, you see, so I came to pick you up.”



He came to pick her up. That’s what Elliot said. Did that meant this young man was the hero summoned in El Meide, the one who was to go on a journey with Lefille?

“As expected, you match how the oracle described you to the letter. Could you tell me your name?”

“I-I’m... Lefille Grakis...”

“Lefille Grakis. Hmm... Lefille-chan, then. It’s nice to meet you.”

With that, Elliot flashed a smile and his porcelain hand to Lefille. Was it an expression of affection? Or perhaps...

“Now then, in accordance with the Goddess Alshuna’s oracle, come with us.”

“Th-That’s...”

Lefille was bewildered. Elliot was speaking and acting as if it was perfectly expected that she would come along. And since the conversation was moving forward all on its own without him, Suimei leveraged his way into it.

“Can I say something?”

“And you are?”

“I’m her companion, Suimei Yakagi. You suddenly introduced yourself and ran with it, but... Are you really the hero?”

Christa appeared quite irritated at what Suimei was implying. She stepped forward as if ready to scold him for being suspicious of them, but Elliot swiftly raised an arm to hold her back and spoke in her stead.

“That sort of suspicion is only natural, I suppose. It is certainly possible for people out there to assume the name of the hero, after all.

However, what I say is the truth. Let's see... In my case, Christa and the people of the Twilight Pavilion can vouch for me."

"Even the people here now?"

"Not long ago, I went with guild members to subjugate some monsters. I do believe that they are well aware of my capabilities."

As Elliot made that statement to give a glimpse at his identity, Suimei looked around at the people in the hall. Several of them nodded to confirm what Elliot had said. So the reason the crowd was astir earlier was because they knew of this young man's identity... Seeing the hero approach a stranger without hesitation must have been an interesting scene indeed.

However, just what did it mean that Suimei was able to understand the language this boy was speaking with a totally different feel to it? Suimei had a good ear for the tongues of his own world, so even if what he was hearing was a translation, he should have been able hear the particulars of the language itself when he focused. The fact that he couldn't do that now suggested this young man wasn't summoned from his world.

Lefille then made a stern expression and turned to Suimei.

"Suimei-kun, this young man also matches the description I got from the oracle. It seems quite certain he is indeed the hero summoned in El Meide."

"Yes, there is no mistaking that Elliot-sama is the summoned hero of El Meide."

Christa quite adamantly vouched for him as well. Elliot then put one hand to his chest and turned to Suimei with a wink.

"So how about it? With this, I do believe that you can trust who I am now."

"That you're the hero, anyway."

"Then—"

"I've heard what's going on from her, and I can accept that much, but having to go along with it is an entirely different story."

"Pardon?"

"The idea that she has to play along with this no matter what... Are the oracles of your dear god that absolute?"

Suimei presented his doubts quite plainly. He was asking something that may have been considered quite obvious to the people of this world, but he had to say it. And the one to reply was Christa.

"Of course. It is the will of our esteemed Goddess. As those who have received her blessings, we have an obligation to adhere to her words."

The people of this world directly received oracles, or, as Lefille would put it, blessings from the Elements and the Goddess. And since Lefille herself was a descendant of the Goddess's right hand, she felt

especially compelled to honor the Goddess. But even then...

"What happens if the person in question doesn't want to do what she was told?"

"But she must," Elliot declared bluntly.

Despite being from a different world, the fact that he was so certain of Alshuna and her will... It wasn't exactly clear at present, but there was likely a reason he had no doubt about the oracle. But even so, it felt strange for him to ask what he was of Lefille in her present condition. Pondering all this, Suimei posed him a question.

"You're going off to subjugate the Demon Lord or whatever, right? And you're going to bring along someone who can't fight?"

"I must admit I also feel awkward in that regard."

Presented with such a reasonable objection, such a reply was only natural.

"Then—"

"However, the fact that I received an oracle regardless means that there is a reason that she must come with me, right?"

"That's reading far too much into it, isn't it?"

"But these oracles passed down to us are something so exquisite and extraordinary that our minds cannot possibly comprehend the true meaning behind them. They must simply be taken as divine."

"Even if you say it like that while gesturing like you're in a drama, it doesn't connect to belief in the Goddess, you know?"

Suimei shot down Elliot's grand manner of speaking and gesticulating. Christa was the one who came at him next.

"From what I'm hearing..."

"Hmm?"

"From what I'm hearing, you seem to be making naught but statements denying the oracle. Are you saying that you oppose not just the hero Elliot-sama, but also the will of the great Goddess Alshuna?"

"Th-That's..."

Christa was lording over the group with a sharp gaze. And having that cast upon her, Lefille faltered. Normally, the mere threatening gaze of some girl wouldn't cause even a fragment of anxiety within Lefille, but with Alshuna added to the mix, it was only natural that she caved. It was there that, to throw Lefille a lifeline, Felmenia challenged Christa with a tense attitude that was quite unusual for her.

"It is certainly true that the word of Alshuna is important, but are you not ignoring the circumstances too inconsiderately? I do believe it is far too hasty of you to take Lefille along with you right here, right now."

"And I do believe everyone is well aware that we are not in a situation where we have any time for leisure. The Kingdom of Noshias

was brought to ruin by the demons, and just the other day, the hands of evil dug their fingers into the Kingdom of Astel, as you may know.”

“And that was prevented.”

“What of it? The problem at hand is that there are demons invading territories even as we speak.”

“However, even if Lefille were to go to go with the hero, that doesn’t mean the current situation will change. Rather, there is a considerable possibility that you would just be dragging an innocent bystander into trouble. Would that not damage the hero’s reputation?”

Felmenia and Christa stared each other down, sparks flying. For a moment, it had seemed that the argument was flowing against Felmenia’s favor, but she managed to counterattack and regain her ground. Christa then tightly sealed her mouth shut in a perfectly straight line, and Felmenia noticed that Elliot was watching her intently.

“...Is something the matter?”

“I would like to hear your name.”

“I am called Fem Ray.”

When he asked for her name, Felmenia created an alias on the spot. Elliot then drew closer to her, looking at her as though she’d piqued his interest.

“Fem-san, you also seem to have quite a lot of mana.”

“Wh-What?!”

“Currently, we are in the middle of expanding our forces to face the Demon Lord. In other words, we are looking for people like you who possess outstanding skills. Fem-san, would you consider coming with us along with Lefille-chan?”

“Wha?!”

“WH-WHAAAAAT?!”

“No, rather than asking if you would come along, it would be better to decide that you were. If I am not mistaken, the authority to recruit allies is also part of being a hero.”

Saying that, Elliot turned to Christa for confirmation.

“...Yes. It is just as you say.”

Though she affirmed what he said, she hesitated for a moment before doing so. It was likely because she harbored ill feelings towards Felmenia. Despite the little clash they’d just had, she was invited to join their party, so it was certainly understandable that Christa didn’t take kindly to the idea. Elliot, however, seemed to pay it no mind.

“Then... do you understand?”

“E-Even so...”

Before Felmenia’s bewilderment could get any more staggering, Suimei cut in.

“No matter how you put it, isn’t that far too high-handed?”

“That may be.”

Elliot didn't try to dodge the question. But he did turn a scrutinizing look on Suimei, as if evaluating him.

“What?”

“She appears to be strong, but you do not seem to possess the skills to be able to endure our journey.”

“Oh yeah?”

“In others words, you cannot come with us. Though it is regrettable, give it up here. To you, it may seem like your two female companions are being taken from you, but to the people of this world, the subjugation of the Demon Lord takes precedent over all else. For the sake of the people of this world, I would have you swallow your tears.”

Suimei's face twitched a little. Having such contempt poured down on him, Suimei was unable to even feign composure. Despite the fact that they'd just met, he had no restraint and said whatever the hell he wanted.

“So how about it?”

“For the sake of the people of this world... Are you saying you can really justify this with that excuse?”

“Excuse...? Do you mean to slander me in saying that I am trying to get away with taking these girls along?”

“You would be precisely correct.”

As Suimei said that, Felmenia limply clung to him and began whining, nearly in tears.

“Suimei-donooo! What do we doooooo?!”

Felmenia was excessively perplexed. Just where had that gallant figure that faced off against Christa gone? Glaring at Elliot, Suimei replied to her.

“In your case, you can just ignore him, can't you?”

“Th-That will not do! Just as he implied earlier, if the esteemed hero of salvation requests the accompaniment of someone, they are obliged to follow.”

Leaning in closer to Felmenia's ear, Suimei whispered to her.

“What about the king's mission?”

“No! If I were to give my real name, the Holy State would likely send a formal notification to the Kingdom of Astel's congress. If that came to pass, even if His Majesty were to command otherwise...”

It wouldn't do her any good, would it? Thinking about it, Suimei recalled hearing about how the king was opposed to the hero summoning at the world conference. And considering how that had gone, there was no way the uncertain intentions of the king of a single country would be prioritized over the good of the world. But even then, Suimei wasn't willing to back down.

“I refuse.”

“It has nothing to do with you. I have no reason to humor your objections.”

“Sure you do. These two are my companions. It only stands to reason that I should have a say in the matter.”

“As I said so before, this is for the sake of the world.”

As Elliot once more used the circumstances of this world as a shield, Suimei grew irritated.

“Like I give a shit about that.”

“Suimei-kun!”

“Suimei-dono!”

Even if it was something that he shouldn’t have said in public, he had to say it. And hearing it, Felmenia and Lefille both raised their voices in surprise. The hero Elliot also spoke up in a considerably surprised tone.

“Are you not a citizen of this world yourself?”

“Maybe so. However, that’s inconsequential to me.”

“You...”

Elliot stared at him in bewilderment, and Suimei returned his gaze with one that showed his iron will. Their staring contest raged on briefly, but one girl quickly put an end to it. It was Christa.

“Did you all hear this man just now?! Behold! This man opposes the words of our awe-inspiring Goddess and defies her will!”

Felmenia and Lefille nearly jumped out of their chairs. Turning her back to Suimei and the others, Christa acted like she was giving a dramatic speech to the people inside the Twilight Pavilion from the corner of the hall. So this was a contrived, exaggerated denunciation to drag everyone else into it and try and intimidate them with numbers, was it?

In response to the loud voice Christa suddenly fired out, various people spoke up. The members of the Twilight Pavilion, who had only been whispering as they looked on at Suimei and the others, were now at full volume. Even the people in line to submit commissions who seemed to be followers of the Church of Salvation were tossing judgmental looks their way.

Before long, the atmosphere in the guild hall was so tense that it felt like it might detonate. Disparaging words like “scoundrel” and “shameless” were being hurled at Suimei. He couldn’t exactly say they were wrong, but turning unrelated people against them by fanning the flames of their religious devotion pissed Suimei off to no end.

“Goddess this, Goddess that... Whatever she says goes, huh? Is the will of the person in question just trash to you, then?”

“That is not the case. However, the problem at hand now is a matter of perspective where such emotions cannot be the only basis

for one's actions."

Even so...

"How idiotic."

"What...?"

Hearing Suimei's overt decrying of his words, Elliot was seized by confusion for an instant. After giving him a sidelong glance, Suimei turned to Felmenia and Lefille. They were likely in the throes of confusion themselves. The wishes of the Goddess and their own wishes were in direct opposition right now, and they were trembling with anxiety at the dilemma.

"Just look at them. Some goddess or whatever who makes people who've lived proper lives quake in fear like that is completely worthless. Am I wrong?"

"You would still speak like that...?"

"Yeah, I just did. What about it? If you're saying that you're going to take them anyways... Hmph, go ahead and try."

Hearing Suimei's provoking declaration, the crowd in the hall was abuzz again. Whispers of "How could you say that to Hero-sama?" and "Do you think you can win against the hero?" were flying around the room. Unsurprisingly, Elliot and Christa seemed to feel the same way.

"You against me, a hero?"

"That's right."

Suimei obstinately reaffirmed that he would not yield. But despite getting a taste of Suimei's indomitable attitude, Elliot seemed unfazed. He then turned to Lefille and tried to persuade her.

"You also understand the importance of the Goddess Alshuna's will, do you not?"

"I-I'm, um..."

Lefille fell silent and eventually nodded. As long as she received the Goddess's blessing, she had no other way to answer.

"Even she seems to understand full well."

"Sure. But even so."

Suimei had made a promise. That no matter the cause, he wouldn't let her go through something unpleasant. He hadn't made the same promise to Felmenia, but he felt the same way about her. With Suimei denying him again and again, Elliot let out an astonished sigh and shifted his attention back to the unrelenting boy.

"...Very well. Though I feel sorry for you, I will be taking them by force."

So it was decided. And following that, Christa once more made a fuss, extolling their righteousness to the crowd.

"Did you hear that?! These people have boldly declared their opposition to our dear Goddess!"

In response to Christa's loud voice, the people in the hall once

more spat insults in Suimei's direction. They were even louder and more vehement this time around. Felmenia remained as she was with a bitter expression, but Lefille was weak to their rebuke. Her face went pale as if she was standing on a bed of nails.

"...Every fucking last one of them..."

Answering the harsh voices that fell on him, Suimei let out his own criticism. These people didn't care at all about what anyone else was going through. They had no empathy, and were just expressing their blind devotion to a figure they'd never seen or met. They were falling prey to a mob mentality, each trying to be the most devoted. It was like they'd abandoned their ability to think for themselves, and it was a poor statement of their character.

"Suimei-kun... In the end, if I just give up..."

Lefille spoke up timidly, and Suimei gently stroked her head.

"Suimei-dono..."

Felmenia's gaze implored him, asking what they should do, what they *could* do. Suimei looked back to her, signaling for her not to worry. He then turned his uncompromising gaze on the hero and his attendant.

Even if they'd received an oracle, this was nothing other than high-handed tyranny. What did they know of Lefille and her circumstances, her pain? Did they even know how long Felmenia had waited to be with Suimei? Was it the heroic thing to do to just ignore those feelings?

Christa was still inciting an uproar. Preparing to have a bout with the hero Elliot, Suimei took his distance. The other people in the crowd lined up and encircled them as if forming an arena.

The reason Suimei acquired power... Recalling that once more right now, anything and everything that held him back was blown clean away.

"Alright. Come get some. I don't care if you're a hero or whatever, but if you're gonna stand in my way, I'll just brush you aside too."

"I believe I already said it. That you do not have the talent to stand alongside us. There is no way that you could possibly be a match for me, I'm afraid."

"..."

"Despite what you might think looking at me, even in my own world I was a reasonably well-known master of the sword and magic. And after coming to this world, I received the divine protection of the hero summoning. You should understand full well what sort of significance that holds."

"Who cares? I don't give a damn about any of that."

"You do not seem to be the type of person who can be reached with conversation. I—"

Before Elliot could finish his declaration, Suimei unleashed his mana and his malice for this guy. Rather than burning hot, it was freezing cold. Between that and the pressure he exuded, the atmospheric temperature immediately fell below freezing. Perhaps because the temperature of the room had dropped so suddenly, all of the moisture in the room condensed in an instant, and even the walls of the guild hall broke into a cold sweat.

Naturally, the color in the face of anyone peeking at Suimei was gone in a flash. Their breath all came out as white mist in the now freezing room. Under the powerful psychic cold that Suimei unleashed, even time itself seemed to have frozen. Scarcely anyone could move. From the tips of their fingers to the tips of their toes, they felt frozen solid.

“What were you saying about my power again?”

“You...”

Even as cold sweat moistened his brow, Elliot persevered. It seemed that his claim of being a well-known master in his own world wasn't just a bluff. He could still move. Normally this was the point where Suimei would at least offer a word of praise for his opponent, but he had no intent of doing so this time. Instead, he coldly approach his enemy with a composed stride. Nothing more.

Elliot drew the sword hanging at his waist and brandished it. Unlike the broadsword that Reiji carried, Elliot's had a long, narrow blade. Mana spread throughout the black blade, making it shine like it was burning red. It was likely made of shining orichalcos. At a glance, it seemed there was no mistaking it. It was supposed to be a material that wasn't suitable for weapons, but it seemed it was treated differently here in this world. But such details weren't what was important right now. The so-called hero was stepping forward with the intent of taking the initiative. However, because of the psychic cold, he was unable to move as swiftly as he ordinarily did, and that compromised some of the strength he received from the hero summoning.

“Elliot-sama... Oh Lightning, thou who art the incarnation of that shining power! Emulate this sharp will of mine, and pierce though in an instant! Blitz Shot!”

Was Christa trying to get in some support first? Urged by the atmosphere in the air, she incanted a lightning spell. With the crackling war cry of electricity, a shining pale violet light appeared in the air. However...

“Vanish.”

With but a single word from Suimei, the manifested power of the mysteries vanished. Christa realized that the magic she wove herself had been utterly dispelled into nothingness. Now sensing just how

large the gap in power between them was, she fell to her knees right where she stood.

And in the middle of that, Elliot came cutting in. Rather, thrusting in. Was it from the blessing of the hero summoning, or was he that good with a sword to begin with? A single thrust with one hand came in like a gale. In a flash, it reached its maximum speed. But when it came to agility, Kuchiba Hatsumi was a step above. The instant before the point of the sword reached him, Suimei rotated his body around Elliot's dominant hand, and while passing by him, began the chant for his spell. Turning his head around, the hero gave Suimei a sharp look. Just going halfway wouldn't be enough.

The chant's energy was the mudra. The Mantra of Light was replicated by the symbol of five variegated lights. His left hand became a fist like a vajra held at his waist, and he brought his right hand with his five fingers slightly spread apart to his left side. The circle was the enlightened mind. And the magicka he wove was the sweet voice of Kalavinka, which forcefully released an opponent's mana.

And then, he chanted with all his might. In other words, a true chant.

“Buddhi brahma. Buddhi vidya. Asat nada mahayama om karuma. Kalpa devana gara. Kalpa—”

[Awaken power. Along with great knowledge. That voice that reaches far and wide is high above in the heavens, and with that sweet echo, thou shalt release the original sin. Thou shalt listen to the eternal voice of the lotus. Thou shalt listen—]

“Please wait right there!”

“—?!”

Suddenly, a voice urging restraint called out to Suimei. He suspended his chant for the moment and turned towards it. And he wasn't the only one. Considering the timing, everyone had their eyes on the owner of that voice. And judging by its high pitch, Suimei could guess it was a woman. When he looked, he saw the therianthrope nun that he and Lefille met at the church they visited. Still kneeling on the floor, Christa asked for her to name herself.

“A-And you are...?”

“I am Sister Clarissa from the Church of Salvation! I come bearing a new oracle passed down from our dear Goddess!”



“Both of you, please put an end to this.”

As Clarissa rose to the stage of the bout between Elliot and Suimei, she looked at the two of them and implored them to stop. Finally standing up, Christa expressed her reservations on this sudden

development.

“A new oracle? What do you mean by that? More importantly, does this oracle have something to do with us?”

“Yes. It concerns the hero and the gentleman over there, and it was passed down to me directly from our dear Goddess just now.”

“Me... and him?”

“Yes. The two of you must not directly come into conflict over the girl with red hair. Settle this matter by catching the shadow who is causing a disturbance here in the imperial capital, it said.”

With this most unexpected arbitration, the crowd was astir once more. To think that oracles would be piling on top of oracles like this... It was beyond anybody's expectations. Suimei addressed the nun next.

“Sister, what do you mean by shadow who is causing a disturbance here in the imperial capital?”

“It is likely referring to the culprit behind the coma incidents, I believe. This oracle is saying to use catching that culprit to settle this...”

“In other words, to use this as a match between us.”

“Yes. And that being the case, please bring this display to an end. It is futile to fight in such a place, is it not?”

With the sister advocating that their fight would be useless, Elliot obediently sheathed his sword.

“Understood. If the oracle says so, then I will withdraw my blade.”

Seeing that, Suimei also quietly dismissed his mana. If he were to recklessly fight in such a situation, there would be nothing to gain from it. After stowing his sword, Elliot looked towards Suimei.

“That appears to be the situation, but what will you do?”

“Hmph. I don't have any obligation to listen to the words of Alshuna or whoever. But if you're saying that we can settle this matter without any future troubles this way, then I'm fine with jumping on board.”

“I cannot stomach your manner of speaking, but... It's settled, then.”

With that, Elliot declared his consent and headed towards Christa.

“Elliot-sama...”

Christa looked at him with an anxious expression, but Elliot turned back to look at Suimei.

“If I am not mistaken... Suimei Yakagi, was it? Your name, that is.”

“Yeah.”

“I will remember that. Now, let's go, Christa.”

Elliot then took Christa and passed through the crowd of

onlookers, leaving the guild behind. As Suimei watched him walk off, Clarissa drew closer to him.

“It has been a while.”

“I never thought you would force your way through like that, sister.”

“I’m equally surprised. I came to the Twilight Pavilion because I had business here, and lo and behold, the gentleman I met the other day at the sermon was stirring up trouble with the hero.”

It must have been quite unexpected for her. To think that, knowing that his opponent was the hero who would save the world, Suimei would pick a fight regardless... Pondering that, Suimei realized Clarissa’s actions were strange. Based on what she’d said, it didn’t sound like she’d come over to bring them an oracle.

“Sister, that oracle just now...”

“The oracle? That was...” She brought her face closer to Suimei’s to whisper to him. Then, with an impish smile, she said, “a lie.”

“Wha... What?!”

“If I hadn’t said such a thing, the hero would have had the shit—Ahem! Would have likely been harshly done in by you, after all.”

With that, the sister began giggling. It was like her goal was to protect the hero.



“I might have lost, you know?”

“Oh my, are you saying that I don’t know what I saw?”

“No, you do have a good eye, it seems.”

Though she didn’t know how exactly the battle would end, to be able to make such an accurate estimation of the outcome wasn’t exactly clerical of her. Perhaps it was her instincts as a therianthrope. But setting that aside...

“Even so, is it really okay for you to lie about the oracle? Sister, aren’t you a follower of the Church of Salvation yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Then...”

And as Suimei said that, Clarissa shook her head to the sides repeatedly.

“Though it may be unbecoming to say as a servant of Alshuna, it’s not like everything our dear Goddess says is right. And to see your unintimidated figure stand up so boldly against what you thought was wrong for the sake of protecting those important to you... I thought it was splendid.”

“Huh...”

Hearing such unexpected words, Suimei was seized by bewilderment. Clarissa gently wrapped her hands around his.

“You possess a good heart. Please do be sure never to forget that part of yourself.”

And with that, the nun took her leave.



Under Clarissa’s mediation, Suimei and the others agreed to a match with Elliot and Christa. And after hightailing it from the Twilight Pavilion, they moved to a quiet location fairly near their house. Felmenia had an extremely complicated expression on her face.

“Hahh... This has become quite the outrageous matter.”

No one had expected that they would end up competing over who could catch the culprit behind the coma incidents faster. Even if it was thanks to Clarissa’s quick-wittedness, they never dreamed they’d be dragged into something like this.

“Sorry... Because of my oracle, even Lady Felmenia has gotten involved in all this...”

“N-No, it is nothing for you to worry about, Lefille! Whatever the origin may be, all we must do is win this match! Right, Suimei-dono?”

As Felmenia realized that she hadn’t quite phrased that right, she turned to Suimei. Suimei, however, was just standing there with his arms folded and didn’t reply to her at all. All he was doing was staring a hole in the ground. Finding his attitude to be somewhat puzzling,

Felmenia called out to him again anxiously.

“S-Suimei-dono?”

“...Yeah, you’re right. If we do something about the culprit or whatever behind the coma incidents, well, it’ll temporarily work out one way or the other, huh?”

Yes, it was just as Suimei had vaguely stated. Even if they won the match, the problem would only be postponed. The match itself was just a ruse made up by Clarissa, and it was possible for the Goddess to pass another oracle down to Lefille. So even if they were successful now, it wasn’t like the fundamental problem was solved. Conflicts of faith like this couldn’t be remedied by ordinary means.

Thinking that, Suimei was confronting his own thoughts on the matter. And as he was drowning himself in a sea of considerations, Lefille anxiously tugged on his sleeve a couple times.

“Suimei-kun, what’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, I’m just thinking about what we should do. About what we should be doing first, that is,” Suimei replied.

“As I thought... Should we gather information from the locals?” suggested Felmenia.

“Good idea, Menia. Can I ask you to do that?”

“Please leave it to me! I came here to be of use to you, after all, Suimei-dono. Ask me anything that you will! Though there may not be that many people who will cooperate with our investigation...”

“Well, there’s not much we can do about that. Our opponent is the hero, after all.”

Yes, it was likely that the citizens of the imperial capital would be unhelpful. But that was to be expected. Between the hero who would save the world and the fools who would oppose him, it was obvious who the people would choose to cooperate with. They probably wouldn’t go as far as actively getting in the way, but they certainly wouldn’t be any help. That point was a fairly serious handicap, but... Well, it wasn’t impossible to compensate for that in and of itself. And while Suimei continued ruminating over that, Lefille raised her hand.

“Then I’ll also gather information.”

“No, I’d like to ask something else of you, Lefi.”

“Something else... Could it be to search for the culprit?”

“No, no, no. I can’t have you doing that kinda thing as you are now.”

Suimei shook his head in response to Lefille’s question. He wouldn’t dream of asking Lefille to do anything reckless in her tiny state.

“Then?”

“I’d like you to go around the imperial capital and bring back as many stray cats as you can.”

“C-Cats? Why do we need stray cats?”

“Well, if we can’t solicit cooperation from humans, then I figured we might as well get it from cats.”

Having said that, Suimei began explaining his plan.



Having each been allotted their own jobs, Suimei and the others split up for the time being. Unlike Elliot and Christa, they were getting a later start and didn’t yet have any clues, so they were quite a bit behind straight out of the gate.

And for that reason, Suimei headed straight to where he’d witnessed something himself. On the day that Liliana guided him to the library, when he was returning home, he’d encountered someone wearing a black hood who was chasing a noble within a pseudo-barrier woven by magicka. Suimei guessed that someone was likely the culprit behind the incidents, but...

“Now that I think of it, they were pretty short...”

The shadow that he confronted inside the darkness was short and slender. Recalling how they’d moved, too, they seemed to have been quite young. Suimei could guess it was a child. Taking that into consideration, complicated feelings welled in Suimei.

What’s this about...?

Attacking citizens, putting them into comas, spreading fear. The military didn’t know what to do, and that culprit was a child. Suimei couldn’t see their motives at all. And while he was letting such thoughts run around his head, he could see a large crowd down the path in front of him.

“What the...”

The crowd was astir with chatter. And that noise became gradually louder. Seeing this unusual phenomenon happening in the middle of a street with a lot of pedestrian traffic, Suimei was also called forth by the spirit of curiosity, and jogged over to the end of the street to take a look. As he did, from within the enclosure of people surrounding something, he could sense dense mana swelling up.

“This is...”

It was a sensation he was familiar with, a wavelength of mana that he had just sensed the other day. Yes, this was the unmistakable mana of Liliana Zandyke. Suddenly, from behind, he could hear fragments of conversations. “What’s up?” someone asked. “The opponent is a guild mage,” another whispered. And among all the conversations, Suimei heard murmurings of “the human weapon,” Liliana’s nickname.

While apologizing to the people around him, Suimei pushed through the crowd as he was jostled about. Eventually, as he arrived

at the front of the crowd, what came into sight, sure enough, was Liliana Zandyke. He could see her cold left eye, and what it was looking down on... were the mages that picked a fight with Liliana the other day.

Unlike before, it seemed that they had taken some severe attacks from her. Their robes were burned and torn here and there. At a glance, it looked tragic. It was likely they'd been hit with fire and wind magic that they were unable to defend against. And it looked like their mana was already dried up.

"If you've had enough... stop meddling with me... already."

"Shit..."

The one to curse as he straightened himself up was the man with the curt tone from last time. His eyes still had hostility in them as he glared at Liliana, but she wasn't willing to tolerate it this time. She once more let loose her dense, powerful mana. The area several dozen meters out from her was swamped in bloodlust. It was so thick that almost anyone could sense it.

The two mages as well as the curious onlookers likely had goosebumps from this. The mana was prickling their skin like an acid in the air. That was the naked manifestation of malice.

And in the end, both the rude mage and the polite mage were left unconscious and foaming at the mouth. With no mana left, it wasn't likely that they would wake up anytime soon. Casting a glance over the two defeated men, Liliana recalled her mana and relaxed her battle posture.

As she did, Suimei realized that the onlooking crowd was regarding her sharply. She had completely and utterly defeated these two men and beat them down until they could no longer stand. It inspired raw fear in the crowd, if not outright dread and disgust.

It seemed likely the mages had picked the fight again, and Liliana wasn't in the wrong. The fact that she was being judged so harshly for legitimate self-defense was somewhat pitiful. Thinking of throwing her a lifeline, Suimei approached.

"Yo."

Hearing his voice, Liliana turned towards him.

"...You again? You seem to appear before me... quite a lot."

"I could say the same to you. So none of that crap about me stalking you, okay? Anyway..."

Setting that aside quickly, Suimei looked at the pitiful men on the street who'd been utterly trounced.

"Did those guys come at you again?"

"That's right. They incorrigibly came... and challenged me again. Despite being adults... they're hopeless idiots. Huge idiots."

"And you're pretty unlucky, huh?"

The gaze Suimei cast over the two fallen men was one filled with astonishment. He thought that if he helped spell out what happened, the people might take a hint. But he has no such luck. The eyes that stared at Liliana were unchanged.

Even though the curious onlookers in the front row without a doubt heard what Suimei had said, they were talking like they hadn't. "The human weapon tormented the guild's mages," one said. "What a ghastly child..." said another. "Why is that dangerous brat left at large?" said yet another. It went on and on. Suimei was baffled. Who would talk about a victim like that? If anything, they should have been criticizing the adults who'd attacked a small girl. So what was going on? Did they just automatically assume Liliana was in the wrong? As Suimei stood there dumbfounded by the malice around them, Liliana made her move.

"Step aside... This isn't a show."

Liliana glared at the crowd with her single eye. With that, the stern crowd of gawkers gradually dispersed. As they did...

"...Monster."

Someone couldn't help getting one last insult in.

"Hey now..."

"It's fine. If you just keep quiet... after a short while... they will all go away..."

"Go away? That's not the problem here. They completely misunderstood the situation, didn't they?"

"It's fine."

Liliana spoke in a somewhat strong tone as she cast her glance downward. Even her words were somehow irresponsible, and had a sense of resignation to them.

"...Are you really okay with this?"

"Yes, it's the same as always. Users of ominous magic... are detested... in the Empire. I am—No, no matter where it is... I am so reviled."

Suimei could hear Liliana's somehow lonely mutter. She sounded like she was complaining that nothing could be done about it anymore.

"The department that I belong to... is special. It's a place that's easy to hate... to begin with, so having someone like me there... is convenient."

It was certainly true that the military had special departments, and there were inevitably ones that the people didn't like. An especially large military courted both domestic and foreign discontent, but if there was an easy target to criticize, all eyes would just stop there. So was Liliana saying that she was taking on the brunt of that malice herself?

As Suimei looked around, the receding crowd was still casting glances at the two of them like they were wild animals they wouldn't dare shake a stick at. People were peeking warily out of shop windows and scowling from the shadows of buildings. All with the same dark, contemptuous light in their eyes. No one should look at a child that way.

And eventually, just as Liliana said, all the gawkers were gone. Having suffered through their treatment, Liliana was also about to leave, but...

"Wait a sec."

"What is it?"

"You're injured."

Had she been hit by the mages' magic? The nape of her neck was slightly reddened. It was likely a burn or something similar. Suimei walked up to her, and held his hand up to the affected area.

"What are y—"

"Just keep still for a bit."

A light green phosphorescence rose from his hand. It was healing magicka. By Suimei's healing hands, the inflamed portion of skin quickly returned to its normal, healthy state. As if Liliana was rubbing something mysterious, she then put her hand to the nape of her neck that had been burned.

"...Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you... trying to be kind to me?"

"No reason. I'm just a whimsical busybody. Does that strike a nerve?"

"Yes, very much so."

What arose in Liliana as she acknowledged that was a sentiment like anger. And seeing her face in such a state, a helpless sense of pity surged out within Suimei.

"It would be fine... if you also... just did the same as them."

"What? Scorn you? Look at you with those eyes?"

"That's right."

"Do you really want it that way?"

"That's..."

"There's no way you do, right?"

"..."

Liliana hung her head in silence. The strength in her shoulders faded, and they drooped slightly.

"Can you get back on your own?"

"D-Do not treat me like a child!"

"I guess you'll be fine then. I also have things to do, so I'm going, alright?"

With that, Suimei walked off in the direction of where he'd had his run-in with the culprit.

"Have it... your way," he thought he heard someone mutter behind him.



"I'm back."

After finishing with his investigation of the crime scene, which bore no fruit, Suimei returned to his house. Lost deep in thought, he nearly forgot to take off his shoes and came to a sudden stop at the front door. As he casually looked deeper into the entryway, he spotted Lefille lying in wait under the warm glow of a lamp.

"Welcome home."

"So you got back first, huh, Lefi? What are you doing just standing around there?"

"I was waiting for you to get back."

"Me?"

As Suimei curiously questioned her, Lefille nodded as she pointed towards the bathroom. And as Suimei came to an understanding, he nodded. She likely wanted him to prepare the bath for her.

The Empire maintained its own water supply, so its citizens could draw from it at any time. But getting hot water required magic. So getting a hot bath would either require someone in the house to know the right magic, or the summoning of a specialist. Obviously, in this house with two magic experts, there was no need for the latter. In fact, the job of heating the bath was left exclusively to Suimei.

"But still, is that a reason to just lie in wait like that?"

"Well, when I brought the cats with me, I got covered in hair, you see."

"Sounds awful."

As Suimei drew closer, Lefille's disastrous state became apparent. Her clothes, her exposed skin, and even her shiny red hair illuminated by the orange glow of the lamp were all covered in cat hair. It looked like she'd gotten into a grand scuffle in the back alleys. It was a little pathetic.

"Is that all?"

"Pardon...? Would there be something else?"

Perhaps she was looking for some gratitude? Just as Suimei was wondering that, Lefille began to pout.

"Oh you... How unreliable... Should I turn you into a walking furball too?"

"I'm fine as I am, Your Excellency. From here, I'm going to seclude myself in my lab, prepare all sorts of magical items, and go through the book I got from Menia, you see..."

“There’s no need to be so modest. Aren’t we companions? Let’s savor this ticklish feeling together, shall we?”

“Hang on... Just hold your horses there.”

Suimei objected, but Lefille was in a fairly playful mood.

“It’s quite refreshing to see you shrink away, Suimei-kun. It’s most amusing.”

“Hey, don’t mess around with me!”

“What’s the problem, hmm?”

Suimei heard Lefille giggle as she threw her arms in the air. She was fully intent on catching him and rubbing up against him. But just then, the front door opened once more.

“I have returned.”

“Oh, welcome home, my savior...”

As Suimei said that to Felmenia, who had just come back after having finishing up gathering information, he put her in front of him and casually darted around behind her.

“...Is something the matter?”

Unable to grasp the situation, Felmenia looked at him with a blank expression. It seemed she’d gone all out with her investigation. Her complexion wasn’t great, and he could see the fatigue in her face.

“Suimei-kun, it’s cowardly to use Lady Felmenia as a shield, you know?”

“Look who’s talking. You were just about to jump on me.”

“Oh you...”

Based on that, Felmenia seemed to deduce what had happened, and turned a reproachful gaze on Suimei.

“Suimei-dono...”

“Eeeh, well, all joking aside...”

With that, Suimei patted both Felmenia’s shoulders.

“Menia, how about you have Lefi teach you how to fix the bath today? You haven’t done it yet, right?”

“Huh?! A b-bath? I do not really... Um...”

In an upset voice, Felmenia began to panic.

“You’re right. This is a good opportunity. Today I’ll teach you the virtues of a good bath!”

“Nooo...”

Felmenia could only whimper in the face of Lefille’s eagerness. Since Astel had no custom of bathing, she seemed to be resistant to the idea. Up until now, she had obstinately refused to be involved with the bath at all. If she would just try it once, her way of thinking about it would change instantly, but she wasn’t even willing to do that. And then, as if trying to get some distance from Suimei and Lefille, who were blocking her escape routes to the front and rear, she stepped to the side.

“Certainly it doesn’t have to be today, no? There will be any number of other opportunities...”

“Isn’t that what you said last time?”

“Lady Felmenia, the same excuse won’t work twice in a row.”

With both of them boxing her in, Felmenia was losing ground quickly. But then, as if she’d been struck with a great idea, she looked at them both quite seriously.

“To tell you the truth, House Stingray has a family precept that forbids me from bathing, so...”

“My, is that so?”

It looked like Lefille was ready to swallow her plausible excuse after hearing the phrase “family precept,” but not Suimei.

“How naive, Menia. In our world, we have magicka to see through lies, you know...”

“That is unfair! The magicka from Suimei-dono’s world is nonsense!”

“So it really was a lie, wasn’t it?”

“Ah...”

Even though things would have worked out in her favor if she just persevered a little longer, Felmenia was an upright person at the very core of her being, and couldn’t keep up the lie.

“Lady Felmenia, you don’t know when to give up, do you? Just resign yourself and get in the bath with me already.”

“Then in that case, I’ll leave heating up the bath to you.”

“No way...”

Sandwiched between them, Felmenia had no way to escape. After confirming that her fore and aft were both blocked off, she slumped her shoulders in resignation. Crestfallen, she was pulled away by Lefille.

After a short time, while Suimei was trying to decide where all the cats would go, he happened to walk by the dressing room and could hear the rustling of clothes. It seemed that the bath had been heated up, and all preparations were complete. And just then...

“What?!”

“...What is the matter, Lefille?”

From the dressing room, Suimei could hear the surprise in Lefille’s voice and the confusion in Felmenia’s. He thought something was wrong, but...

“B-Big...”

“Huh?”

“Tch, those may just be more than I had in my original form...”

Just what was she so shocked to see? Suimei was clueless, but Felmenia seemed to figure it out.

“I don’t really understand... but is this about my breasts?”

“That’s right. Exactly what did you eat to grow like that, Lady Felmenia?”

“Nothing in particular that I am aware of...”

“Are you trying to keep it a secret? That won’t work!”

“It’s alright. In time, yours will grow big too, Lefille.”

Felmenia kindly remonstrated Lefille, but Lefille mustered her competitive spirit.

“I-If I were to return to my original form... Um, I wouldn’t be... quite as big as you, but...”

“Original form... you say? You’ve been speaking of such a thing for quite a while now, but just what do you mean by that?”

“As a matter of fact, this childish form I inhabit right now isn’t my true form. In truth, I’m both older and taller than you.”

“U-Umm...”

Felmenia expressed perplexed hesitation at this declaration, at which Lefille grew somewhat angry.

“Are you saying that you don’t believe me?!”

“What? No, that is not the case. I believe what you’re saying. Given time, you will grow, after all.”

“You don’t believe me at all, do you?!”

In the end, until she actually returned to her original form, it seemed like no one was ever going to believe her.

“Grrr...”

Just based on the dissatisfied tone in her voice, Suimei could picture Lefille’s pouting cheeks, but...

“...Eavesdropping is in pretty bad taste.”

Suimei had unintentionally gotten engrossed with their conversation, and though somewhat late, he realized that listening wasn’t something he should be doing. And then, just as Suimei was going to walk away...

“Lady Felmenia, sorry, but just bear with me.”

“What is—What?!”

“Ugh, this elasticity is devastating...”

“Wh-What exactly are you doing?! Please don’t grab me like that!”

“This is just a little examination... Hmm?”

“Wh-What is the matter—Eek!”

“Lady Felmenia, you have a little bit of flab that can be grabbed around your hips, you know? Isn’t this quite bad?”

“I-I don’t need to be told that! Wait, I’m telling you not to grab me!”

“Sorry, that was rude of me.”

Suimei realized they were both naked behind that door.

“Two, three, five, seven, eleven...”

Listing off prime numbers, Suimei turned bright red and retreated.



They were there, lurking in the darkness. Their dark robes made them indistinguishable from the darkness around them at first glance. A short shadow and a tall shadow. Moving across the sleeping city like they were flying, they darted hither and thither as if sewing the darkness together. Keenly suppressing their presence as they searched for their prey, they were surely hunters.

Suddenly, the short shadow stopped. As if directly opposing Newton's laws, it stopped cold as it leaped through the air, and landed on top of the laid out bricks on the ground without breaking their silence.

"What's wrong?"

"No, it's... nothing."

Following that, the tall shadow landed beside it. The answer the short shadow had given may have just been a lie. The reason the short shadow stopped was because they found fault with a living creature on top of a wall. No, the reason they stopped may have been because the creature had found fault with them.

Sitting atop the wall much higher than anything else around, both of its eyes were open as wide as they could be. Its pupils shined with a glare as it stared right at the short shadow. It was a cat. A stray cat that lived in the imperial capital, which had caught the short shadow within the two yellow lights of its eyes.

"Prrrrr..."

It began purring. Just what was that supposed to signify? The cat stood up on its fuzzy legs and left without a sound. The tall shadow then placed its hand on the shoulder of the short one.

"Let's go."

"...Yes."

Demonstrating their agreement, the tall shadow followed the short one as they began moving again. Of course, they were moving towards accomplishing their goal. The target this time around was said to be passing through the outskirts of the high class district. The source of that information was the taller shadow in the rear. Yes, the tall shadow always brought dreadfully accurate information. The short shadow was accomplishing their goal by using that. It was likely that the tall shadow possessed an information network that even surpassed the Empire's intelligence department. The target this time around was someone who'd gotten away before because an unrelated party had gotten in the way.

"It's in this area. Set the net."

Hearing those words, the short shadow nodded without any opposition. And just as asked, the short shadow wove together the

spell quickly. And just as they were about to begin the chant...

“Meow.”

“—?!”

Hearing a cat’s meow at such an unexpected time, the back of the short shadow trembled slightly with surprise. Quickly turning around, they could spot a cat sitting behind them. Had it crept up on them without a sound? It was snuggled up against the wall of a building, and just like the other cat before, it was staring dead at the short shadow. Completely fixated. As if it was carefully monitoring their every movement. A dark cloth was wrapped around its arm, so was this one somebody’s pet?

Stopping the use of their magic for a moment, the short shadow took a single step towards the cat. However, the cat was unperturbed. It only kept its dilated pupils completely fixated on them. They took a step forward, and the second cat finally seemed to sense danger. It stretched out with what appeared to be a yawn, then it turned its back to them and left.

Just what was that? They didn’t understand what the cat’s expectation was, but pulling themselves together, the short shadow invoked dark magic. Obscuring the light in their surroundings, it was a spell that weakened one’s sense of vision. With this, discounting any coincidence, their target would no longer be able to escape.

And before long, said target appeared. Had he had his fill of spirits and wine? His footsteps were unsteady, and he didn’t even notice that he entered their darkness. The job this time around would be easy. All the short shadow had to do was cast magic on a drunk, a trivial matter. Just as they’d done with the others, they would cast dark magic on this man.

And when their dark business was concluded, all that was left was the detestable noble unconsciously sprawled out on the laid brickwork.

With that, one more sprout of anxiety had been plucked away. Just a little more... If they repeated this just a little more, all obstacles that blocked that person’s path would be gone.

The short shadow unwittingly let out a sigh of relief, and just as they turned around...

“As expected, the second player is a step behind, huh?”

That voice came to them.



Having their senses lured by that voice, the short shadow turned around and spotted a young man who appeared to be in his late teens. He was of a medium build, and at a glance, seemed to be

extraordinarily common. But still... there was something about his look that was truly extraordinary. Just a step behind, the tall shadow also turned towards him.

Why...?

Why was he here? That thought dominated the short shadow's mind and threw it into chaos. Why... Why was that man right here right now?

They'd met before. This was the man who bewildered them in the streets of the imperial capital. Suimei Yakagi.

It was as if coming here was his goal, and he grimaced as if he'd arrived late. It made it look like he'd come precisely to stop them from achieving their goal. And he wasn't alone. There were others who appeared together with him in the darkness. Behind him was a small figure the small shadow recognized, and a woman with silver hair that they didn't.

These were unexpected intruders. The short shadow didn't know the reason for their appearance, but there was no mistaking that these intruders came to capture them. However, since their work had already been completed, the shadows had no business with the intruders. It wasn't a good idea to leave them be, however, after they'd been spotted.

"...I'll leave the rest to you. You can manage on your own, right?"

"Yes."

A single word of agreement was returned to the tall shadow, who implied getting rid of the intruders.

"Ah—Wait!"

Realizing one of the shadows was taking flight, the silver-haired woman raised her voice and immediately exchanged looks with Suimei Yakagi. However, after seeing the tall shadow assimilate into the darkness with a sidelong glance, Suimei seemed unconcerned and prioritized the unconscious noble.

"It's fine. Don't give chase. I'll leave that geezer to you two."

"R-Right."

After she acknowledged his request, she rushed over to the man together with Suimei Yakagi's other companion, the red-haired girl.

"So, is it safe to assume that you're the culprit behind the incidents?"

"..."

"If you keep silent, then I'll just assume you are."

The shadow had no intention of answering. They had met and exchanged words with Suimei Yakagi before. Even if they used magic to change the tone of their voice, when they had to activate their magic, their voice would reveal their identity. It would be a different story if they used the language of the soul like when using the

mysteries which dwelt within them as if chanting the spell from within, but right now, they would not commit such a folly.

Then Suimei Yakagi slowly raised his arm and took a posture like he was about to snap his fingers. That was the technique that had destroyed the magic staff of the mage from the Mage's Guild. They did not understand how it worked, but the moment he snapped his fingers, magic of the wind attribute would activate, causing the air to explode. It was advanced magic that appeared simple. The lack of a chant and keyword was one thing, but the time from the spell's construction to the activation was extremely short. A dreadful combination that was quite useful in combat.

The reason he raised his arm so slowly was to throw off their sense of anticipation. Since this was a world where everything could be over in the blink of an eye, not knowing when an attack would come meant relying entirely on one's senses to dodge or defend.

Snap!

“...Urgh!”

As the shadow tried evading by jumping to the side, the space to their side burst at almost the same time. However, it seemed that there was a direct connection between Suimei's gaze and his fingers, which formed a straight line to where the effect would occur. If they hadn't seen it before, they wouldn't have caught on, and likely would have been blown away immediately.

But now was no time to dwell on such thoughts. Anticipating they would be thrown off balance, Suimei Yakagi was already running towards them. He was fast. He wasn't using some sort of special magic to reinforce himself, but the speed he was running at was still significant.

“Permutato, coagulato, lotum artificium existito.”

[Transform, coagulate, become fine craftsmanship.]

The shadow could hear Suimei mutter a few more words as he ran.

“Arma Argentum Vivum.”

[Mercurial Arms.]

With that, the liquid in the reagent vial in his hand divided into two points and transformed into a metal staff. When he then twirled the staff made of silver metal, a whistling sound like the wind being cut by a whip rang through the air. The tip of the staff was unerringly headed straight for the shadow, and the speed that he was running at did not slow down in the least. Despite being a mage, he had frightening combat experience. In response, the shadow wove dark magic.

“Oh Darkness. Tear down the curtain which covers heaven and fall. Then grind, beat, strike, and crush my enemy, bringing them

down to earth. Darkness Punisher.”

A darkness of a completely different nature than the black of the night sky spread out overhead. Then the blackout curtain that seemed to stretch out over them came crashing down like it would flatten everything below. Just as it was about to reach the young man blessed by a favorable wind, he took decisive action, jumped to the side, and slipped out from beneath it by a slim margin.

The shadow manipulated the blackout curtain and twined it around. As if he was grabbed and pulled by some invisible giant’s hand, the young man made an evasive maneuver in the air that appeared to defy all logic. Suimei Yakagi landed safely, but the look on his face was a puzzled one.

“Hey, what’s with that technique?”

There was no way the shadow would reply to that question, but the silver-haired woman behind him made known the true identity of the magic that had just been used.

“Suimei-dono! That is magic of the darkness attribute! Not only that, but it’s considerably powerful!”

“Darkness attribute...?”

It seemed that the man before the shadow’s eyes, Suimei Yakagi, had never seen dark magic before this. He seemed skeptical at what he was even hearing. It was clear he didn’t know the darkness attribute well, so this was a good opportunity. But just as the shadow was thinking that, the young man’s mouth began to move.

“Mea acies est facta invisibilis, sed est instar adamantium acre, et demergit meus inimicum in sanguis.”

[My blade is invisibly made, however with sharpness like steel, it drowns my enemy in a pool of blood.]

At the same time a magic circle took form at his feet, a sound like something was being cut reached the shadow’s eardrums. It was a different sound than the metal staff whistling through the wind. No, the sound that slipped into the darkness was like the sharp ring of a blade as it coldly cut through the stillness of the night. This was some sort of sword in empty space. However, no matter how much the shadow strained their eyes, they couldn’t see it, which meant it hadn’t just slipped into the shades of the evening. If it couldn’t be seen in the first place, the only option was to feel it.

Immediately sharpening their senses, strengthening them, and casting them like a net of threads into their surroundings, they dodged. They were not movements to dodge a sword, but movements to evade incoming arrows. As the first one passed by the shadow, the ground behind them was scarred by a slash. And this repeated multiple times. However, while they were in the middle of an extremely nimble dance, the young man began chanting once more.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore.”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician's resentment.]

The spell that he was weaving was, as expected, something the shadow had never heard before. In that case, they would respond in kind.

“Oh Darkness. Ye who deludes all and drives them mad, give form to temptation. Guide all those far and wide who take hold of the blackened snake to ruin. Hand of Frenzy.”

The spell they wove was a specially made magic. An original which used the darkness attribute. By using its special characteristic, it would destabilize an opponent's spell and cause the phenomenon they were bringing about to become uncertain. Magic that was made uncertain either wouldn't activate, would bring forth a different phenomenon, or would turn on its user. And from any of those outcomes, if the opponent were to anticipate it and make adjustments to try and correct it, the spell would harm them directly. Or it was supposed to...

“Tch—Resonato! Repercussum qui flagitat discordia, convertit in fluctuationem et in ventum dispareto!”

[Resonate! Take the echo which calls forth discord and disturbs the peace, convert it to instability and vanish in the rumbling wind!]

Suimei Yakagi interrupted his original chant and cut in with an entirely different one.

“Harmonies Aeolia!”

[Tuning wind!]

And as those words rode the wind, a change certainly occurred.

“Wha...?!”

The moment the darkness imitating a snake coiled around the magic circle rose into the air, both the snake of darkness and the magic circle turned into light and shattered to pieces. What was illuminated as the piece of light scattered like confetti was the figure of the young man standing there like nothing had happened.

He was safe, which meant he managed to defend against the dark spell completely. But that was impossible. The thing known as magic, once activated, was something the Elements themselves took control of. That meant that there was a certain part of every spell that not even its caster could control. The spell the shadow had used made use of that and used it against their opponent... So if it didn't work, did that mean the Elements weren't involved? Even if that was the case for argument's sake, that meant this man precisely controlled everything about the magic he used... In other words, it was magic that didn't require the Elements.

While the shadow was taken by surprise, Suimei Yakagi swung his empty right hand to the side as if flinging away the surplus mana that

was left on his arm.

“Phenomenon Mixer.”

“...?”

“It’s the magickal law that you used just now. Though it’s true that you didn’t use it perfectly... Good grief, despite not even knowing basic fucking magicka theory, you sure got some nerve to do that crap...”

The way he was informing them of such like he was spitting out abuse was likely his way of showing admiration. And following that, a chill dominated the area. Did he now completely recognize the shadow as his enemy? His eyes were sharp, and the pressure in the area grew. The shadow had thought this back when he defeated the members of the Mage’s Guild, but as expected, Suimei Yakagi was a considerable master.

He could activate high-level magic in a short amount of time, and even steal the magic his opponent cast and had control of to use it as is own. His true strength likely rivaled that of even the Elite Twelve. He may have even surpassed them.

“Primum et secundum moenia, expansio localis.”

“—?!”

A golden magic circle rose up into the empty air as if it were a shield to protect him. Suimei Yakagi then began moving. The shadow reacted to his bold step forward and tried to retreat. But having read that move, he accelerated at an impossible rate from his initial velocity and closed the distance between them.

Close combat wasn’t the shadow’s specialty, so they wove a chant together rapidly. Suimei Yakagi was about to snap his fingers, but perhaps realizing something was up, he abruptly escaped from where he was.

His reaction was fast. While still in the construction stages of the spell, he was able to devote himself to evasive action without any hesitation. Just what kind of senses did he have to be able to do such a thing? That sort of reaction was practically foresight.

And even as the shadow was thinking such things, they could see that he was already taking countermeasures, too. A magic circle once more floated into the air. However, it was not just one... or even of one variety.

A double chant? No, this was...

“Illustre carmen. Ad viginti transcribito. Invocato Augoeides!”

[Illustrious spell. Transcribe up until number twenty. Invoke Augoeides!]

“Ugh!”

Spears of light that were not of the light attribute came rushing in like a sudden shower. Having allocated dense mana to the spell, did

he then change it into a means of attack? Not only that, he had prepared multiples of the same thing, and then activated them all at once... Was he a monster? The shadow just barely dodged the slanting rain of light. They dodged, and had to counterattack.

Yes, they had to defeat these people in their way. For the sake of that person. That's why they felt nothing for their own safety. Even though they judged that plunging in would be far too risky an act, once the shadow saw that the cloud of dust kicked up from the shattered brick was clearing away, they ran towards the young man as if to slip past him. However, he saw through even that. Suimei Yakagi was right in front of them, his metal staff transformed into the shape of a sword, before the shadow knew it.

Charging in just as they were nevertheless, the shadow was planning on striking the tip of their ebony staff against the inside of the sword. Since the shadow always watched that person's sword techniques, they had confidence they could handle this young man. There was not a single person in the Empire who surpassed that person in swordplay, after all. However, Suimei Yakagi's sword was no ordinary sword.

As the staff struck and repelled the sword, unexpectedly, it didn't leave its owner's control. As if drifting, it fluently drew out its trajectory. Using the energy of the points of the two staffs the shadow pulled out to strike, the sword in his hand performed one revolution as its sharp point drew a shining circle in the air.

A magic circle. The light of the mana which rose up was a shining red. A flame spell.

By the time the shadow realized it, the magic circle was complete, and the blade pointed towards them reflected in their eyes. They could tell it was aimed at their collarbone, and so managed to evade the thrust. But the magic was a different story. In such a situation, there was no means of defending against it. What could they do? The shadow could feel heat coming from the magic circle. It was magic of the fire attribute. Right behind light, it worked well against darkness, an attribute that boasted of strong destructive power.

"Urgh!"

While bracing for the heat and pain to assault their body, the shadow clenched their teeth and threw their body down on the brick sidewalk. Using that momentum, they rolled across the ground without any regard for their safety. But thanks to that, the flame only licked their robe, and they had taken practically no damage.

The level of the impromptu magic was several levels below the one from before, and though it was infantile, the shadow was saved by its light body that could carry out a tight turn. The silver-haired woman then called out to Suimei Yakagi.

“I shall cover you.”

“It’s fine. More importantly, I’m leaving that geezer and Lefi to you. Be careful of changes in mana and phenomena in the surroundings. Stretch out your domain to the sides so that it doesn’t stand out.”

“This is...”

The silver-haired woman looked around. And shortly thereafter, after a quick blink, both her eyes shot wide open all of a sudden. What they had perceived was surely none other than the black of a different nature than the darkness brought by the night.

So Suimei Yakagi had noticed it? The black haze concealed by the shades of the evening. As one would expect... Even though the shadow was trying to sink them into the darkness while they were unaware, he was mindful of it. But even though he was capable of stealing another’s magic, it didn’t seem that he could interfere with magic of an unfamiliar attribute. Dyed in the haze made by the dark magic, the moon could be mistaken for a flawless black pearl. And the moment that the silver-haired woman returned a nod to Suimei Yakagi, the shadow began weaving their spell.

“Oh Darkness. Thou shalt now creep out of the chaos from whence thou hide. For the sake of demonstrating thine power. I will seek no retribution. Nor shall I show anger. And thus—”

And what was added on to the chant there were the forbidden words to enhance dark magic.

“Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron... Hateful Red Retaliation.”

“Ex primo ad quartum, omnis regio aegis!”

[From the first to the fourth, all area defense!]

Suimei Yakagi folded up the same type of golden magic circles as before into a semi-sphere that expanded them around him. Darkness and light collided. The rotating magic circles scattered shrill noise and luminescence, and managed to defend against several of the bands of darkness, but...

“Ugh—”

From Suimei Yakagi’s mouth, a slight groan of anguish leaked out. The darkness that seeped through his goldish shield swarmed around his left arm. And as the most definitive proof his safety was finally threatened, the shadow could spot a bead of cold sweat slipping down the bridge of his nose. The spell was a success. It was the first time one of their attacks had actually reached him.

However, even after a while, Suimei Yakagi did not collapse. Against a dark magic spell of such destructive force, the sharp pain and the physical weariness that crept across the affected region like crawling bugs and the despair that violated one’s very nerves should

have made any opponent twist their face in anguished screams. Suimei Yakagi remained, however, with his two feet planted firmly on the ground and was staring at the shadow intently.

“Are you...”

Were there words of hatred for his enemy to come? No, what came next was...

“Are you manipulating this kinda thing... like you are...”

Anger and pity were mixed in awkwardly with his misgivings.

Was there a reason to ask such a thing after all this time? The shadow was a master of dark magic. They used magic that ate away at their own body like worms, and with that power, they would bring down all who would impede that person. It was obvious. To the shadow, this was completely natural. Something they had to do. Yes, everything, absolutely everything was for the sake of protecting that person...

For the sake of protecting that person, did I wound him with my own hands?

“—?!”

And just then, the shadow realized something. Yes, the line that they should never have crossed. Who was this? This man wasn't one of the nobles who threatened that person, was he? So why... why would he not just settle down and do as he was told? Suimei Yakagi was a man who'd called out to the shadow with a gentle voice. A man who'd tried to make sure they weren't alone. And here he was, that same man... After everything he'd done, had the shadow really fired off dangerous dark magic that could have easily taken his life?

“Hey, wait—!”

By the time they realized that, the shadow was running away from him.



It was unexpected that Suimei was struck by his opponent's magic. Immediately after the short shadow retreated into the darkness, Felmenia and Lefille came running over to him.

“Suimei-dono!”

“Suimei-kun!”

Even as they approached him, Suimei continued to intently watch the black haze tenaciously coiling around his left arm. And seeing him like that, Felmenia called out to him again.

“A-Are you alright? It appeared that you were struck by that dark magic just now, but...”

“Yeah, I ate it. It fucking penetrated the rampart.”

Saying that, Suimei showed his left arm to Felmenia. Where his glove and cuff were, there wasn't anything unusual, but the portions

of his arm that the black haze coiled around were blackened and looked like they had lost moisture.

“Th-This is...”

“They got me good. Seems that attack is probably classified as a particularly strong destructive force, even among other astral attacks. And it’s not just effective against the astral body. There’s a large fucking influence showing on the physical body too.”

As Suimei said that, his face became grim. Lefille then stood on her tiptoes and took a look for herself.

“Will this be alright?”

“If I leave it as it is, it’ll rot and crumble.”

“Wh-What?!”

“I-I-I-Is that not a serious problem?! Qu-Quickly, restoration magic! No, is that even something that can be fixed by restoration magic?! Ummm, what to do, what to do, what to—?!”

After hearing Suimei’s grave prediction, Lefille raised a surprised voice, and Felmenia lost her composure altogether as she fell into a frenzy.

“Hey, calm down, Menia.”

“Is this something you can even be calm about?! Rather, how are you able to remain so composed, Suimei-dono?!”

“That’s right, Suimei-kun! Necrosis is not a trivial matter, you know?!”

“It’s fine, I’m telling you. Since my astral body was done in, it just means that even if I use healing magicka, it won’t go back to normal right away is all.”

“Is that so?”

After Suimei nodded back to Lefille, Felmenia let out a grand sigh of relief. His arm was wrinkling up and looked pretty bad, but in reality, the condition—Well, he still couldn’t say that it *wasn’t* bad. Just based on the fact that his astral body had been damaged, it could be said this was a serious affair. Since it wasn’t just a normal wound, it would require a considerable amount of time to heal properly. He wouldn’t be able to use his left hand for a while, it seemed. And as Suimei once more lowered his gaze to his left arm, a patrol whistle rang out.

“...The military police, right?”



It was a little after the military police came running over well past the eleventh hour and demanded to know what had happened. While they questioned Suimei and the others about why they were present at the scene, the military police seemed to have indirectly heard about the situation Suimei and the others were in, and they were able to get

through the questioning without any problems.

After giving the police a summary of everything that seemed necessary and just leaving the rest out, the military police went about investigating the scene. But even that seemed like they were just pretending to look around.

As Suimei casually watched them, he could see they were restlessly moving around, but obviously not making any progress with their investigation. In the end, it seemed that they did not have a good understanding of dark magic either. Even the consultant who eventually arrived from the Mage's Guild could only just shake their head.

And while that was going on, the blockade formed by the military police at the back of the scene had become quite noisy. Before long, the crowd of military policemen split, and a single man wearing a military uniform came through.

"What a coincidence. I had heard that there was someone who challenged the hero, but to think it was you."

It was a familiar voice. Suimei and Lefille recognized this man. He was the one they'd seen at the church, and the same man Suimei had seen take Liliana away by the library.

"If I'm not mistaken... We met the other day, did we not? You appear to be someone from the imperial army, but why are you here?"

And as Suimei asked him that, the man closed his eyes without a single change in his expression.

"I have no need to give you an answer to that. There is only one thing you need to do now, and that's to tell me what happened here. Nothing more, Suimei Yakagi."

Had he heard Suimei's name from Liliana? He spoke to Suimei in a tone that almost sounded like a command. Suimei fixed the disheveled portions of his clothes and returned an answer.

"My apologies, but would it be alright for me to ask your name?"

"I am a colonel affiliated with the imperial army, Rogue Zandyke."

It seemed she'd heard that name before, and Lefille knit her brow in surprise. She then muttered what seemed to be a title.

"One of the Seven Swords..."



With a bitter orange backdrop emitted by the mana lamps that felt like it could burn one's eyes, many shadows were restlessly moving about. It was the site of a coma incident. Suimei and the others who happened to be present were sent back home, and in front of Rogue, who was watching the military police continue their investigation, a small shadow wearing a military uniform appeared.

“Where have you been, Liliana?”

Rogue called out to her without even turning to look at her, and Liliana replied in a stiff manner.

“I was just... feeling the night breeze... a little...”

“I do believe I told you explicitly not to go outside needlessly.”

“My... apologies...”

Hearing Rogue’s reprimand, Liliana shrank back, seeming even smaller than normal. Seeing Liliana contract like that—like it was an illusion of her physically shrinking—Rogue spoke again without changing his expression at all.

“Fine. Have you heard of the situation?”

“I have heard... most of the details... from the military police. I have a grasp of it.”

“I see. From the state of the military police, how does it look to you?”

“It is... the same as always. The target of the culprit... was another noble with a bad reputation... and without doing any serious investigation... they punch in their time day and night... and seem to just be betting on whether... the hero will do something about it.”

“A bad reputation... you say?”

As Rogue repeated her words in a way that was unusual for him, Liliana nodded back. The military police were the same as always. They had no motivation whatsoever with regards to this case. But that was expected. The upper echelons of the Empire and the Church of Salvation made their move first, so the military police had no real gusto to attack this job.

Even the hero who was added to the investigation recently was unable to make any proper use of the military police. The second player was only just falling behind. To her, the hero and the nobles posed no threat whatsoever. Yes, after innocently returning to the scene of the crime, that’s what she thought, but...

“It may be convenient to me, but because of this, recently those around me have been noisy.”

“Colonel...”

Was that grumbling because he was racking his brains on the adverse effects the incident had brought about? Yes. The noble that she defeated today, as well as all the nobles that she had defeated up until now, were all a bunch that thought lowly of Rogue, who’d risen through the ranks as a commoner. If they just looked down on him, it would be one thing, but they were even maneuvering to bring Rogue down and finish him off. If those types of people were all dragged into the incidents one after the other, people were bound to get suspicious one way or another.

That was trouble. But if she were to fear that and be negligent with them, one day Rogue would be crushed by the jealousy and envy of those damned nobles. That's why, no matter what happened to her, for the Colonel... Yes, for the adoptive father who picked her up and raised her...

With that, Liliana hardened her resolve and apologized to Rogue in her heart.

"Liliana."

"Y-Yes."

While she was immersed in thought, Rogue suddenly called to her and exposed her failure to pay attention. However, without reprimanding her for it, he spoke as if staring into the darkness at someone who'd vanished.

"About the one from before, Suimei Yakagi..."

"Is there something... about that man?"

"I want information about him. Make contact and investigate him."

Hearing that unexpected order from her adoptive father and superior, Liliana returned a puzzled question.

"With... Suimei Yakagi?"

"Correct. It seems that he came in contact with the culprit of the incident. He said that he ran into them coincidentally while investigating."

"Colonel, do you think... he is the culprit?"

"I do not believe he is. I am just curious."

"...Fully understood, Colonel."

Acknowledging Rogue's order, Liliana followed after him as he barged into the investigation of the military police.

Chapter 4: Anti-Magicka Dark Magic

In the few days since making contact with the culprit behind the coma incidents, Suimei hadn't slept a wink between treating his arm and investigating dark magic. He was now in a corner of the grand library the Empire boasted of, scowling at the spines of books.

"Dark magic, right..."

Dark magic. From what he had heard from Felmenia, the authority on magic in this world, it was particularly difficult to wield among the eight attributes, and was believed to be special for that reason. Since Felmenia also wasn't an expert on the subject, her knowledge on it only extended to the conditions and effects its spells caused. And though there was someone who used dark magic even in Astel, because they were the type to not get involved with others much, she'd never had a chance to learn about it in great detail.

That being the case, even after coming to the Imperial University Library with its extraordinary collection of books, grimoires on dark magic were few and far between. And even then, they only ever said things like that it was magic which manipulated darkness, or that it was heretical among the Elements, or that one couldn't use it unless they had a strong affinity for it, or that it destroyed the caster's body. There was practically nothing that could be used as reference.

"..."

Suimei unwrapped the bandages around his left hand and took a peek. Penetrating through the brilliant golden fortress's ramparts, the spell that had injured his body was a black haze tinged with the raw essence of moisture—darkness. His hand and arm that were hit with it appeared to be completely dried up, and now had blackened bruises rising up on them. Just what was this?

Fire, water, wind, lightning, earth, wood, and light were all existences with substance, the Elements. When it came to darkness, it was something that couldn't be characterized as energy or substance.

Normally, when speaking of darkness, it was something that absorbed light, or was empty space where nothing existed. In that sense, darkness was the absence of light, so it wasn't like the thing known as "darkness" had its own presence.

It was certainly true that things like dark matter and dark energy existed. They were, so to say, things that had to exist to prove the correctness of the laws of physics, apparent substances and apparent

numbers that existed on top of theory.

If one were to consider those things darkness, there was a technique to create them. Using complex numbers with numerology, one could join together numbers which didn't exist in the world and manifest that which did not exist, after all.

However, in this world where mathematics had not yet developed that far, things like the concept known as complex numbers discovered in modern times and apparent numbers probably didn't exist. And even if they manifested, they would never bring about the same effects as dark magic.

Another possibility was the absolute nihility—the avidya. But it's wasn't like they could manifest it here, and moreover, dark magic was an attack which had a direct effect on the astral body. It wasn't something that could be inferred by normal ways of thinking.

The ability to interfere with spells, the power to obstruct light, an astral attack that could deal direct damage to the astral body... Did a single power which combined all those characteristics really exist in the world? Wondering that, a laugh naturally spilled out of Suimei's mouth.

“Heh heh heh...”

Yes, this was it. This was one of those times when he found himself slammed into a wall while pursuing the mysteries. This was precisely when he was able to feel that he was truly pursuing the unknown. Exactly because such things existed, he could stretch his hand out into the domain of impossibility and truly feel that he was a scholar of the mysteries. It was validating and confirmed his goals. In the end, he had to continue pursuing it. Dark magic. Everything.

The level of civilization in this world was relatively humble compared to his own world. In that case, when it came to the common sense of theory and law here, it was necessary to put himself on that level. An age where heat was based on phlogiston theory. No, even further back than that. Based on that, what could there be?

To perform what was commonly referred to as an astral attack, it was mainstream to use Goetia. Borrowing the power of a mystical existence, it attacked the astral body that human hands could not normally reach. This also applied to hexes from witchcraft, ancient Gand magicka, and yin-yang arts. Coagulating thoughts in the negative direction, they could easily bring harm to the spirit of another, or even their soul. Yes, in a spell. However, all the magic in this world functioned on the premise that the Elements were involved. He couldn't think of any exceptions to that.

But, at the time, what was going up my left arm was surely resentment.

That was right. When he spoke out unintentionally back then, he was sure he felt it. Just what that dreadful sensation assaulting his

nerves was. That power was certainly the negative power known as hatred and resentment. It was something that humans should never use in its raw form. And he remembered his hatred for those spells that didn't take into consideration their own user's body. That tiny body. Probably a child. Yet they still wielded such power.

Suddenly, the image of Liliana popped into his head. Was there something to the fact that she had roughly the same childish features as the culprit? If that were the case, was this not where he should step in and correct her path down to the proper one of a magician?

My head is a mess, huh? I need to put it in order.

His thoughts were becoming incoherent and illogical. But this was relatively common. People tended to see connections and patterns, even where there weren't any. It wasn't that Suimei had divined the identity of the shadow. His brain was just on rapid fire. Liliana wasn't that shadow, and she wasn't the dark magic user behind his attack. She wasn't walking down the wrong path of magicka.

"Su... mei... no!"

That's why he had to think hard. Right now, he had to focus on dark magic. It was definitely the power of negativity. In that case, what did it mean that it used the Elements? No, for starters, did it even use the Elements? Perhaps that premise was false in the first place. If that were the case, the spell that manipulated it... By going up the stream of the history of the mysteries, it had to be...

"...Suimei-dono!"

"A-Aah, Menia?"

Hearing a loud voice right next to his ear, Suimei suddenly lifted up his head, which had been cast down deep in thought, like he was jumping to his feet. It was Felmenia that had called to him. She continued to speak to him in a somewhat astonished tone.

"Just Menia, huh? Just what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, I was just doing a little thinking is all."

"Augh... Was I being a nuisance?"

She sounded apologetic, but Suimei simply waved his hand and urged her towards the corner of the desk where he'd been camped out to do his research. And then, while organizing the magical items he'd brought to read grimoires, Suimei asked her about the information gathering he'd tasked her with continuing.

"So, how was it?"

"Well, I was not able to muster all that much from my side."

"I see. As expected, people aren't cooperating, huh?"

"It seems that the pious residents of the city have the ear of the others, and things are being stifled a bit in that regard."

Felmenia made a bitter face as she spoke. Just as Suimei had expected, it seemed it would be difficult to gain any ground by talking

to the townspeople. It would be the most they could do to get a few cooperators to keep their ears to the ground.

“Though the people from the military police were relatively cooperative.”

“Why’s that?”

“It seems that the military police have cause to think poorly of Elliot-dono.”

“Oh?”

“A little before we began our match against the hero, you’re likely aware that the hero was added to the investigation, but... When it was decided that he would join, it seems the military police were also made to cooperate with him. Using the Church of Salvation and his title as a hero, he simply had the military police hand over all of their information.”

Certainly, hiding behind the Church and his title as the hero was a useful ploy. Though it was undeniable that it would be a great annoyance to anyone he played it on.

“Well, from what I heard from the military police between their drinks and sobs, they were saying that all their hard work is credited to the hero. There were many of them who were unhappy, but that is likely why Elliot-dono is able to progress as he has.”

The hero Elliot. The only time Suimei spoke with him was at the Twilight Pavilion, but it seemed he had much more of a serious personality than Suimei thought. Because he had the Church under his thumb, Suimei’s investigation was at a standstill, though the person in question probably wasn’t fully aware of what he’d done.

“So, what, are the military police using us to retaliate?”

“It seems that they are even taking bets on how it will end.”

“They really have zero motivation, huh? Even though it’s their fellow countrymen being harmed...”

Enticed by the sigh that Felmenia let out, Suimei twirled his index finger as he shoved it into his temple. Felmenia then continued as if that wasn’t the end of the story on the military police’s apathy.

“There seems to be more regarding that matter, but I will report on it after I have grasped what is behind it.”

“Got it. Also, what happened to that noble that was there when we showed up?”

“It seems that he is currently recovering in his own home, but just like the other victims, he remains unconscious.”

The man who was probably struck by the short shadow’s magicka was immediately taken away by the military police, so Suimei hadn’t gotten any details on his condition. After he finished investigating, should he look into it himself?

“I see. I’ll leave the follow-up to you.”



After hearing Felmenia's report and taking a short break, they settled down side by side in chairs at the library. Suimei then casually brought up something he suddenly realized.

"Come to think of it, we can communicate without any problems and I can even read the books here..."

Suimei realized that he had been involved with books and conversation quite a bit lately. From the strange way Elliot talked, to the fact that he could read books in a library written in a completely different language...

"It is because of the blessing of the hero summoning. I recall talking about this once before, I believe."

"Yeah, I just realized that I wasn't really paying attention then. I missed all the details, but effectively, why are we able to communicate?"

"Those who are summoned by the hero summoning ritual automatically have a spell cast on them to translate language, but regarding that, it's based on the knowledge of the one who performed the summoning."

"Oh?"

"In your case, that would be me, but... If there's something you know that coincides with something that I also know of, then the words will be translated. If it's something that you're unfamiliar with, the word will be untranslated but match how you would pronounce it. And of course, if it is something that I do not know of, it will match our pronunciation but remain incomprehensible."

Which meant that there was a limit to the translation based on concepts that were or were not known. It was true that back when Suimei fought Felmenia, the words "barrier magicka" were completely unknown to her. That was likely a limitation of the translation. With regards to dark magic, it wasn't something Suimei was familiar with, but even in this world, it was probably just a mashup of the words "dark" and "magic," which was why Suimei heard it that way. And while Suimei was ruminating over these thoughts, Felmenia thrust out her ample chest with some sort of pride or self-confidence.

"In other words, the one who is helping Suimei-dono with conversing, reading, and writing is none other than me."

While she was beaming expectantly beside him, Suimei let out a simple sigh of admiration and thanked her. Felmenia then moved the topic to something she'd forgotten to ask since she arrived.

"Come to think of it, Suimei-dono, how is your investigation coming along?"

"Terribly. There's not the eensiest, teensiest thing that I can use

for reference here.”

As he pretended like he was ready to give up, Felmenia made a somewhat disappointed expression. She was melancholic. But seeing that she’d misinterpreted his joking manner, he put on a serious face to make it clear it had been a joke.

“But as far as countermeasures go, I’m in the middle of thinking about it.”

“Countermeasures?”

“Yeah, that and just what on earth that magic was.”

“When it comes to dark magic, there is much about it that is not yet known, but... Can you analyze it using only the knowledge from your world?”

“I don’t think it *can’t* be done. There is no such thing as a matter in this world that cannot be explained, after all. Well, I at least have my eye on something.”

Suimei spoke with just a hint of optimism. From all the information he’d gathered, he’d gotten a lead and thought he might be on to something. He just needed to observe it once more for himself to be sure. And then, Felmenia spoke up while tilting her head just slightly to the side.

“I have something else that’s been on my mind in regards to that.”

“What is it?”

“The words used at the end when that dark mage chanted their spell... I have never heard them before. Ummm...”

Felmenia grimaced when she was unable to pull those strange words up out of her memory. Instead, Suimei recited them for her.

“Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron... Right?”

“Ah, yes, that was it. Those words. I have no memory of ever hearing anything like them. Just what were they...?”

Felmenia’s voice tapered off as she spoke. As her pensive expression grew more and more stern, a voice called out to them from behind.

“Excuse me. May I bother you for a minute?”

As the two of them turned around, they were met with the sight of a male library employee with a pale complexion. He was an acquaintance of Suimei’s who he’d met when he first came to the library.

“Mr. Librarian, huh? I’ve been making use of all sorts of materials here again today.”

“Yakagi-kun... was it? I see you are as enthusiastic as ever.”

As if praising Suimei’s diligence, the librarian responded with a smile. Suimei flashed a somewhat complex smile.

“Well...”

And as he responded to the man, Felmenia spoke up. She wasn’t

acquainted with him.

“One of the forest people? Suimei-dono, this man is...?”

Forest people was probably a way to identify elves. Since the librarian had introduced himself as an elf, it was likely a colloquialism.

“This is Romeon-san who works here as a librarian. When I came here before, he gave me a tour of the place.”

“Is that so? How unusual. I have heard that the forest people in general do not involve themselves with humans much.”

Felmenia knit her brow as she looked at Romeon like he was something peculiar. And hearing what she said, the librarian returned a bitter smile.

“I am often told that I am an eccentric. I left the forest I was born in to make a living, after all.”

From what he said in a self-deprecating manner, it seemed the ways of elves of this world were similar to the stories of elves that often circulated in Suimei’s world. They lived in forests and were quite insular. But the matter of elves aside...

“By the way, did you need something?”

“No, I was just passing by and heard you were talking about dark magic. It caught my interest.”

Hearing that Romeon was drawn in by curiosity, Felmenia opened her eyes wide as if this was unexpected.

“Do you know of it?”

“Yes. Well, I have spent some time with it before, so I’m somewhat familiar.”



Interested in the talk of dark magic, Romeon ended up sitting down at the desk opposite Suimei and Felmenia. And he took his seat, he immediately cut to the point.

“Dark magic... To put it briefly, among the eight elements—fire, water, wind, earth, lightning, wood, light, and darkness—it is a most powerful magic. No, most fiendish may be a better way of putting it though. And so, why are the two of you looking into dark magic?”

“It’s just... this thing, you see.”

As he spoke, Suimei undid his bandages. Upon seeing Suimei’s hand, Romeon’s expression changed to one of surprise.

“This is... So that’s why you are investigating dark magic, is it...?”

Romeon corrected the position of his glasses, which had slipped a little, with his finger and let out a grim groan. It was Felmenia who posed him a question next.

“If you can understand that much from seeing it, does that mean that you are also aware of the symptoms?”

“Before coming to this library, I worked as a magic doctor, so I have taken on the task of treating those stricken by dark magic. Yakagi-kun, may I take a closer look?”

Having no real reason to object, Suimei nodded and held out his unbandaged left arm. And after Romeon closely observed it for a long moment, he let out a sigh of admiration.

“...The condition has stabilized, I see. Normally after being struck by a powerful, encroaching dark magic spell like this, it would have reached all the way to the core of your body by now... Yakagi-kun, did you do this yourself?”

“Well, all I did was apply a healing spell I know.”

“No, it was quite a splendid treatment method. I have never even seen such admirable medical care before.”

After Romeon said that, his expression then changed completely. He looked quite severe as he asked his next question.

“Where were you that you were struck by dark magic?”

“The culprit behind the incidents that are shaking the city right now used it, you see.”

“You... were attacked?!”

Suimei and Felmenia summarized the situation for him. About how they ended up in a competition with Elliot due to the oracles of the Goddess, and how they made contact with the culprit a few days ago. Quietly listening to all this, Romeon’s expression remained grim.

“Is that so? So such a thing... Certainly, I’ve heard of the rumors about someone going up against the hero, but to think that it was you...”

After drawing a long, fretful breath over the situation that Suimei and the others had fallen into, Romeon corrected his posture in his seat and looked earnestly at Suimei.

“Though it may not be my place to say so, please stop.”

“Stop... searching for the culprit?”

“Yes. It is likely not something for an outsider like me to be telling you, but if the culprit is a master of dark magic, then your opponent is far too evil. If you took a less fortunate blow from dark magic, there’s of course the chance of contracting a fatal affliction, but you very well may lose your life from the shock alone.”

“Even so, I have two of my comrades at stake.”

“But there is no replacement for your life, is there? Certainly it would be dangerous to go with the hero as well, but...”

Saying that, Romeon took a glance at Felmenia. Having heard his frank opinion, a complicated expression floated up on her face.

“Also, just earlier, you recited the word ‘Baybaron,’ did you not, Suimei-kun?”

In response to that question, Felmenia knit her brow and raised

one of her own.

“Even regarding that...?”

“Regarding that word, I remember having heard it quite a long time ago, you see.”

“If you know of it, could you perhaps teach us about it?”

After Romeon nodded heavily at Felmenia’s request, he slowly began speaking.

“It is something called a savage name.”

“A savage name, you say?”

“Yes. Savage names were born into this world at the same time dark magic was. They’re cursed words that are said to have been lost in ancient times, and when used with a special attribute—in other words, when used with the attribute of darkness—they have the effect of amplifying its power.”

“Amplifying?”

“Yes. It’s said that dark magic with such words added to it attains several times the destructive force of regularly fired magic. I am guessing that the master of dark magic you spoke of added that word to their chant.”

“Then they were...”

“Yes, I do believe it is likely they’re capable of using substantially powerful dark magic.”

As Romeon made that declaration, Felmenia swallowed her breath.

“So let me say so once more: please stop this. No matter how many lives you have, it will not be enough.”

“But this is something that we must do.”

“For the sake of your comrades?”

Suimei nodded at Romeon, and perhaps having given up on trying to convince him further, Romeon let out a somewhat exasperated sigh.

“Then I understand that it will be impossible for me to dissuade you.”

“Forgive me. We even had you teach us about dark magic...”

“It’s alright. But absolutely do not forget the danger of dark magic.”

Shortly after that, Romeon excused himself and returned to his duties.

“Dark magic and savage names... Suimei-dono?”

Felmenia tilted her head as she grimaced in deep thought. And then, while she muttered as if uttering some matter of distress, she looked towards Suimei, whose gaze was wandering somewhere far away.

“Savage names... huh...”



Since their last encounter, the culprit was still at large and had claimed another victim. Today, Suimei was walking around the city on his own to memorize the layout of the imperial capital, and was looking for cats on the side.

The military police, the hero, and Suimei's group. Perhaps because the people investigating the matter had multiplied, the culprit seemed to be striking less often, which made nighttime investigations less fruitful.

Because of that, deciding that he wanted to solicit more cooperators, Suimei was looking around alleyways, thickets, vacant lots, and the like. And then, while scooping up the second cat he'd found, Suimei emerged from an alley.

"Come on, quit nibbling me. Even if you gnaw on my finger, it isn't tasty, now is it?"

Just what was it so happy about after being stroked once? Suimei was slightly troubled by the cat who was playfully biting at the index finger of his right hand. The way cats chewed on things for fun was fundamentally a toned down version of the fatal bite they unleashed on their prey. But the cat he was embracing now was so relaxed that it just seemed like it wanted to be pet more. As Suimei pondered this, a familiar face appeared before him.

"Suimei Yakagi..."

It was unmistakably Liliana Zandyke.

"Ooh, twintail eyepatch girl, huh? Long time no see."

"Twin... What? What is with that... incomprehensible nickname?"

"Well, it kinda... At any rate, what a coincidence running into you here. What, did you end up wanting sweets after all?"

Suimei lightly joked around with her, but Liliana didn't seem to be in the mood. She responded to him with a suddenly frightening aura.

"You're wrong."

"So it's not sweets?"

"That kind of thing... doesn't matter."

"Then what's up?"

The air about her was tense. It was something she always had, but this was somehow different from usual. She then turned her discerning eye on Suimei's chest, and her composure crumbled. For against his chest, Suimei was clutching two cats.

"K-Kitty... Here, here."

"...Huh?"

And as Liliana spread out her arms as if telling him to hand over the cats, she drew closer.



After being begged to by Liliana, Suimei handed over one of the cats he was carrying, and the four of them were now settled down on a bench near a fountain.

“Meow, meow, meow, meow...”

But Liliana didn't pay Suimei the slightest bit of attention as she mimicked a cat's meowing and innocently played with the cat he'd given her. Looking at her from the side as she held both front paws of the cat and made it dance to that famous nursery song, she seemed as happy as if she were in the middle of an early afternoon paradise. On her face was an uplifting and brilliant smile that Suimei had never seen her make before.

“Meow, meow, meeeow!”

With that, as Liliana finished the rhythm, she hugged the cat snugly. She really seemed to love cats. Seeing her with one was quite adorable. Seeing that she'd completely forgotten that he was even there, Suimei called out to her.

“Looks like you're having fun, huh?”

“H-How long... are you planning to stay there... Suimei Yakagi!”

“I mean, until you return the cat to me?”

Liliana replied with a perturbed expression.

“Return this child... to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn't this child a stray? It's not... your cat. Why are you trying to abduct this kitty? Depending on your answer... I'll give you the death penalty in military court, you know?”

Just what did she mean by 'abduct?' As she pierced Suimei with a cold and scornful glance, she even went as far as to threaten his life. It was rather barbaric of her. After all, Suimei had properly gotten a meow of consent before bringing the cat along. Well...

“Why, you ask? Because I wanted to pet a cat.”

“Hmph... Is that so? If that's it... then fine.”

Seemingly approving of his motives, Liliana once more engrossed herself with playing with the cat. He really couldn't get his head around what had convinced her it was okay now. But either way...

“You really like cats, huh?”

“Not just kitties... I also love doggies. All animals... are good children, after all.”

Liliana then posed a question to Suimei, but kept her eyes on the cat in front of her and didn't look at him at all.

“I heard... that you are having a match with the hero... to catch the culprit behind the incidents, right?”

“Yeah, I'm surprised you know that.”

“Information... naturally reaches... my ears.”

That was likely because she was affiliated to the army’s intelligence division. And as Liliana spoke of that without an air of pride about her, she continued with a follow-up question.

“Why... did you get involved... in something like a match... with the hero?”

“Well, that’s ’cause my two companions are at stake.”

Suimei stated what he thought everyone already knew, but...

“If the Goddess says so, it’s fine to just... leave them to the hero, right? That way... you won’t get dragged into trouble, and it should be easier... for you. Also, an oracle from the Goddess... is not all that common.”

“That’s quite the cold way of putting it...”

“It may be cold... but it stands to reason.”

“Reason, yeah...”

As Suimei was indifferently parroting her words, Liliana turned a slightly irritated expression towards him.

“Doesn’t it? Also, I’ve heard about it... but what’s wrong... with that hand?”

“So you also heard about this too? Yeah, I got done in good by that culprit.”

When Suimei said that, Liliana lowered her gaze to the bandages around his left hand.

“...It’s in... bad shape... isn’t it?”

“Well, not really. It’ll get better pretty soon.”

“Get better...? It’ll get better?!”

“Hmm? What, is it something to be surprised about?”

Sensing that Liliana was unexpectedly surprised, Suimei turned the question back over to her. He cocked his head to the side, but Liliana abruptly averted her gaze.

“N-No, I just heard... that it looked rather bad... from the Colonel...”

“I see. Well, regardless, I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Do you... even understand? Up until now, the culprit has... laid their hands on many people. They’re a dangerous criminal. It’s better if you... withdraw.”

“What’s that? You’ve been snapping at me about this for a good minute now. Could it be that you’re worried about me?”

“That’s not really the case,” she retorted in no time at all.

“I’ve been told something similar recently, but if I had any intent of dropping out halfway, I wouldn’t have accepted the match in the first place.”

“Why? Why do you... obsess over it to that point? Moreover... if it’s something necessary to save the world—”

Was she saying that it was normal to just give up? For the sake of the many, sacrifice the few? With an impending crisis threatening the world, maybe that was the pervading logic.

“Before that...”

“What is it?”

“Let go of it. That’s enough, right?”

Suimei pointed at the cat that Liliana was still hugging. She hadn’t realized it, but the cat was swishing its tail left and right.

“Cats, you see... When they’re generally unhappy, they’ll wave their tails like that. It’s probably a little hot from being hugged.”

“...Do you not like it?” Liliana asked the cat in a disappointed voice.

She then reluctantly let it go. It inclined its head to the side and began observing Liliana. It seemed that the cat was interested in her, and wasn’t too terribly mad at her. Realizing that, Liliana regained the sparkle in her eye as she affectionately gazed at the animal.

“About... the question before though...”

“Let’s see. About why I’m opposing the Goddess and hero, was it?”

Liliana nodded. And after letting out a sigh, Suimei eventually replied.

“Hey, do you have something you want to protect?”

“Something... to protect?”

“That’s right. That’s what those two girls are to me.”

That was it. He had no choice but to do it. Felmenia came to help him even though there was no benefit in it for her, and Lefille’s case didn’t even need to be explained. To him, those two girls were without a doubt what he had to protect.

“I don’t... really understand. I can’t see the need... to go so unreasonably far...”

“So you don’t get it? Let’s see... For example, how ’bout your family or something?”

“...”

Somehow, Suimei felt like he could hear a voice with no sound.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t... have any family.”

Her voice grew colder as she spoke those few dejected words. Had he stepped on her tail or something? He wasn’t sure what roused her ire, but if he recalled correctly, he was sure that she at least had a father. Suimei had met him at least three times, the soldier with swept-back hair.

“That guy... is your father, right?”

“Before the Colonel is my father, he is my superior.”

Just what did that even mean? Even if they had that kind of relationship, during times of peace, wasn’t he a father first? And just

as Suimei was about to ask that, Liliana cast her gaze down and guessed his question.

“The Colonel is not my real father... I was abandoned by my real parents, after all.”

“...Is that so? Sorry. Was it something I shouldn’t have touched on?”

“Not really.”

Still, Suimei apologized again. He then gave her the answer to the question she’d pressed to him.

“Well, my relationship with those two may not be all that deep, but they’re truly important to me.”

“That’s why... I’m saying it’s reckless. You’ll die an early death... as an idiot.”

“That’s a super mean way of putting it, seriously.”

“But... even I...”

“Hmm?”

“It’s... nothing.”

Deciding it was fine in the end, Liliana shook her head. Suimei nodded in response and brought that conversation to an end. He snuck a glance at her, but the sparkle in her eye earlier was gone, and she seemed absentminded. The cat held out its front paw to her, and she continued to play with it and keep it company. She did so halfheartedly for a while longer, and while looking around, Suimei spotted a nearby food stall selling frozen sweets. He got up, walked over to it, and bought two servings.

“Here. As thanks for last time.”

Realizing that he was handing one to her, Liliana looked up with her sleepy-looking eye.

“I thought I said... I didn’t need it.”

“Well, whatever. You won’t lose anything from taking it, so just take it already.”

“I don’t need it.”

“I already bought it, so...”

After hanging her head in silence for a short while, she eventually raised a melancholic voice to him.

“Why do you... treat me kindly?”

“Even if you ask why...”

“You should also just treat me cruelly... like everyone else does... Just deal with me... as something unpleasant.”

It was dark. Her eye, along with any and everything reflected in it. She was in pitch black darkness. She was abandoned and reviled. Her words told Suimei how people really treated her, and he’d seen a glimpse of it himself.

“Aren’t I ominous? Despite being tiny... I possess mana that can

harm others... And I am aggressive towards anybody. That's why..."

"Does everyone treat you like they did that time on the street?"

"In the Empire, I am a symbol of fear. A great dark light... created to hide the shadow of the intelligence division."

"That's why people like me don't exist, you mean?"

"That's right. There are no people like you. Other than the Colonel..."

As that mouth spurred on her twisted will, she gradually lost her composure. Liliana dejectedly slumped her shoulders and fell silent.

"He doesn't seem like the kind of person to chat about anything needless, but he's a good person, huh?"

As he summed up his impression of Rogue, he took out the soft dried meat he had in his pocket and gave it to the cat.

"But... isn't it painful?"

"It is my job. I can't refuse it... just because it feels unpleasant."

"That's why you've resigned yourself to your current situation?"

"I'm the Colonel's pawn. If I reject my military duties... I will lose my place in the world."

There was no way a twelve- or thirteen-year-old could know her future's course.

"All we're talking about is me."

"Do you want to hear about me instead?"

"...Why are you in the Empire?"

"There's just a little something I want, you see."

"Where did you learn... that strange magic?"

"My father taught me."

"How did you find... the culprit?"

"By coincidence while I was searching for them."

"..."

"What, is this an interrogation? Were you told by that Colonel to probe into my disposition or something?"

"Something like that."

Liliana answered plainly with a somewhat guilty expression. Was she saying that there was no reason to hide it? But not a moment later...

"What a coincidence, Suimei Yakagi."

As Suimei turned in the direction of the voice that had called out to him, he was greeted with the sight of Elliot.

"Aah, the hero..."

Was he on a stroll? Or maybe it was part of his investigation. It was a strange encounter.

"Are you in the middle of a break? You seem to have quite the surplus of free time, I see. Perhaps your investigation has completely stagnated?"

“Do you have the leisure to sell your oil in this kinda place? I heard you haven’t had much luck in terms of accomplishing yourself, you know.”

“Could you not get carried away just because you found the culprit by coincidence once? Are you not sitting here yourself, playing with animals?”

It was a rather sharp-tongued exchange, but there was no sense of hostility between them. Elliot seemed to have come over just to give his greetings, and thanks to the conversation Suimei just had with Liliana, his heart had cooled down quite a bit. He wouldn’t flare up like last time.

“Is that magic priest or whatever not with you today?”

“It is not like Christa is always together with me. She has her own time as well. Incidentally, you seem to be with yet another girl here, I see.”

Having said that, Elliot turned his gaze towards Liliana.

“You sure react to women quite a lot, huh?”

“Is it not healthy for a man to react?”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

Suimei shrugged his shoulders at Elliot’s joke, and Elliot snorted like he found it unpleasant. He then looked at Liliana again.

“So, who is she?”

“She’s not a companion, alright? She’s an imperial soldier. She’s interrogating me about a cat abduction.”

“There is no mistaking that you were caught red-handed. You will do well to have yourself taken to prison.”

“Says you.”

Suimei stuck out his tongue, and giving him a sidelong glance, Elliot pointed a smile towards Liliana. Despite dealing with the hero, she created a wall of animosity and mana around her. Elliot seemed somewhat taken aback by that, but he didn’t really lose any of his composure.

“My, am I hated?”

“Who knows? This one’s always like this, so I can’t tell.”

Suimei gave a noncommittal reply. Suimei really didn’t know Liliana’s opinion of Elliot. Watching her play with the cat, Elliot called out to Suimei.

“Hey.”

“What?”

Did he have something he wanted to ask? Suimei responded in a blunt tone, but Elliot replied in all seriousness.

“Let me ask you once more. Why do you go against the words of the Goddess Alshuna? Even if, for example, it is because the oracle is beyond understanding, is it not the will of the Goddess of the world

you all live in?"

"Conversely, I want to know why you who comes from another world so blindly accepts the word of this world's god."

"It is not like I am blindly accepting it or anything. It is just that I thought it was something I must do, so I took it on. That's all."

Elliot spoke as he looked far off into the cloudless sky. The way he put it sounded somehow familiar to Suimei...

Reiji was also like this, huh?

Even his good friend Reiji had a similar sense of responsibility to this second hero's. He'd stubbornly said that it was for the sake of the people of this world. Suimei started thinking they had that in common, but just what did that...

"The Goddess Alshuna is the god who created this world, right? Omniscient and omnipotent, I hear she protects the people from evil. Just take that much into consideration. Are you saying that the will of such a noble being is meaningless?"

"A noble being, huh?"

Suimei sounded like he'd just heard a bad joke and was scoffing at it. As for Elliot, who was being quite serious, that made him a bit angry.

"Is something strange about what I said?"

"Strange? Of course it's strange. Omniscient and omnipotent? Noble? What? Are you trying to say some crap like it's a deity full of innate goodness or something? Like hell those guys are that kinda noble being. Every last one of those fuckers mercilessly cut down all those who wouldn't benefit them, you know? You're really holding on to some delusions about gods..."

"Delusions, you say? I must say your statements seem to carry no weight."

"...That may just be so. But in truth, even you don't know, right?"

Elliot was unable to say anything back to that.

"So that's how it is. Like hell I'll bend over backward for some existence that nobody truly knows."

"Certainly, you may have a point after all."

Hearing Elliot accept that train of thought, Suimei looked at him with a strange face.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised. From the flow of the conversation, I totally thought that, just like your attendant, you were gonna go on some tirade about how nonbelievers are the enemy or whatever."

"Even I understand full well of the presence or absence of faith in others. In my world, there is not just one god, you see."

In response to that, Suimei waved his hand indifferently towards Elliot.

“That so? Then it’d really help if you took that into consideration over the oracle thing.”

“This and that are different matters. I do not understand what significance there is in her being with us, however, if it is needed to save the people of this world, then she should come.”

“That again?”

“Everything in this world is engaged together with the gears known as fate. There is not a single matter that holds no significance.”

“Maybe so, but our match or whatever has ended up being a pretty strange twist on this, huh?”

“If you find it troublesome, then you should just withdraw.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Suimei spat right back at Elliot for every one of his comments. Seemingly giving up on trying to convince Suimei, Elliot clapped his hands together once as if saying that was the end of their conversation.

“I can tell I have been a bother. I’m glad that you are someone who can be talked to after all. However...”

Elliot paused for a moment as if he were carefully choosing his next words.

“I do hate you.”

“What a coincidence. I also find you nasty.”

As if slipping by in the opposite direction he’d come from, Elliot walked right past Suimei without another word. Had he come just to confirm whether or not Suimei was someone who could hold a conversation? Or had he just come to announce that they couldn’t get along?

While Suimei was warily pondering Elliot’s intentions, Liliana’s long glove got caught in the claws of the cat she was playing with. When she tried to pull her hand away, it pulled her glove down. Suimei saw her exposed arm and hand.

“—?!”

Liliana immediately rolled her glove back up to hide her arm. It seemed Elliot hadn’t seen what was underneath that glove.

“What is the matter? Are you alright?”

Elliot was too late to catch a peek, but Liliana had no reply to give him. And after looking towards Suimei in a somewhat panicked state, she immediately turned her back to him.

“Excuse me!”

Watching her get smaller as she ran off, Suimei was unable to call out to her. For the hand under that glove was just like the skin of a demonized human—blackened and altered as if it had goosebumps.



“Is it true that you figured out who the culprit is, Suimei-dono?!”

“Suimei-kun, is that true?!”

Felmenia and Lefille’s surprised voices rang out in their living room. After returning home, Suimei had given them the news. They both dropped what they were doing and came running over immediately. Felmenia was in the middle of studying magicka and hadn’t paid her personal appearance any mind, while Lefille had several cats clinging to her as they dangled down. Suimei nodded back to them in a complex mental state.

“...Yeah.”

“What’s wrong. Suimei-kun? If you found the culprit, isn’t that a good thing for both us and the country though?”

“That’s true, but also not... How do I put it?”

Suimei let out a heavy sigh with a difficult expression on his face, and Felmenia looked at him in puzzlement.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you before that I ran into Liliana, right? And while searching for cats, I ran into her again today...”

As the two girls listened silently with intense concentration, Suimei unraveled the gist of the postulation he’d arrived at. As he slowly moved his mouth, the outline of what he should be doing gradually took shape in his head. What he believed in, what he had to accomplish... What he had to do as someone who held people dear in this world, in light of all this, to come out on top of this competition with the hero. No, it wasn’t even something that he really had to put that much thought into this late in the game. Just as he had been all along, if he lived earnestly, that was all that mattered.

And when everything came together, what resounded deep in his heart...

“Save the woman who can’t be saved.”

Were the words of his father.



Nighttime. One of the culprits causing the coma incidents in the imperial capital, the short shadow—Liliana Zandyke—based on information from the tall shadow, was headed to bring down “the noble who would bring harm to Rogue.”

Although she was leaping through the night, she was also gathering mana to put to use the domain of darkness and turmoil. In other words, making preparations to construct that spell she was quite familiar with by now. Turning a blind eye to the restless sensation deep in her heart, she landed without a sound on her own shadow cast by the full moon.

At times like this, she had to wonder... Had she landed on her

shadow, or was it the other way around? Was it one or the other? When she used powerful magic, she would sometimes lose herself in such thoughts. That darkness-colored human cutout, or the figure that was illuminated by the moon—just which was the real her?

Casting her eyes down, she looked at the warped shadow on the rugged rooftop. Somehow, it seemed to be flashing an evil grin. She knew that it was nothing but a delusion, but it may have been precisely because of that that her heart was restless.

The tall shadow who preached their goal, sometimes in a whisper, was not with her right now. It seemed they had their own business to take care of, so she was taking independent action today. In general they moved as a unit of two, but it wasn't all that rare for her to accomplish her goals on her own like today. She didn't have the support of the tall shadow, but because she had experience participating in imperial military operations, she wasn't anxious. If anything, this job was a mere trifle. Her target was someone hardly worth considering an opponent. The military police and the hero were unable to find her. But she still had one lingering anxiety. If Suimei Yakagi showed up like he did last time, things wouldn't be so straightforward.

“...”

Liliana recalled what happened that afternoon, and came to a stop atop a roof. On Rogue's order, she had made contact with Suimei Yakagi and carelessly let him see her arm. Under her long gloves was the transformation that progressed with every use of dark magic. Her horrid hand and arm.

When he saw that, just what did he think? In the end, did he also think she was a monster? Thinking back on it, aside from Rogue, he was probably the first person who'd ever spoken to her kindly. Talking to him was the most she'd ever conversed with anyone.

Descending from the roof, she removed her eyepatch and looked at her reflection in a glass window lit up by the moon. What was reflected was her face, her left eye, and one other thing... Something that no human should have. A right eye that was just like that of a dragon. Her eyelid was covered in small black scales, and her pupil that was standing vertically was long and narrow. The portion of her eye that was supposed to be white was all golden. Any who saw it would scorn her. A monster, they said. Even her real parents were no exception.

If Suimei saw it, would he continue talking to her as he had been? He was different from everyone she knew. He'd never raised a harsh word against her. He was gentle. Suimei Yakagi. He could give off a rough and tumble impression, but he was really just a busybody who smiled at her gently.

When next they met, she would be happy for him to treat her the same way. That would mean their current relationship could be maintained. And that was exactly why she didn't want him to look for the culprit. She didn't want him to search for her anymore. He might not be able to give up on those important people to him, but all that meant was that if she were never caught, there would be no winning or losing.

That's why, here and now, she prayed he would not appear.

"Meeeeeaaow."

"..."

Suddenly, as if cold water had been poured on her, a meow brought her to her senses. There was a cat sitting atop a wall, all its attention focused on her as it sat there with its tail wreathed around its body.

"Huh—?"

And that's when she realized. There were a great many eyes in the darkness around her. Yes, she was surrounded by the golden glinting of cat eyes. She looked around. Cats. Cats. Cats. On top of walls, in the shadows of buildings, on the rooftops, in the branches, on the brickwork sidewalk... They were all over, just peering at her. Where had they come from? Just how were they looking at her as she hid herself in such darkness? Just what exactly was going on? Each and every one meowed at her. The eerie chorus of so many cats and the glinting of their eyes oppressed the darkness in the area.

But before long, the meows came to a sudden stop. When they did, the first cat she'd seen opened its mouth. And though it opened its mouth wide as if to meow once more, no sound came out. Instead it seemed to yawn, and Liliana felt like she could hear its voice.

"...It couldn't be!"

She recalled a similar encounter and came to a realization. That night that Suimei Yakagi appeared... Back then too, she'd caught sight of several cats. And she'd seen him collecting strays today. The stray cats of the imperial capital, who avoided humans like the plague, were so docile with him... She'd never even thought about what he was using them for.

She didn't know what kind of wiles he'd used to enlist the support of cats. It was possible he was using them as informants. But Suimei Yakagi used magic that she didn't know about. He was an opponent beyond the norm.

"You people... No matter what, you deny the mysteries right before your fucking eyes."

Those words he'd spat out at the members of the Mage's Guild came to mind. And indeed, it was just as he said. The idea of impossibility was nothing but shackles to a mage. So if she believed

that the silent voice of that cat had been calling out to him, if the cats were conveying her location to him...

By the time she realized it, the cats had all dispersed. And in their stead, beyond the gently sloping path that she turned around to, she could see the silhouette of a human figure peeling away from the darkness. It wandered over like it was leaving a dark violet afterimage in her eye. It was more sinful than the darkness that she used. Something that only one who obtained wisdom beyond knowledge could wield.

“So we meet again...”

The shadow that appeared—Suimei Yakagi—quietly spoke as he approached. It was not the relaxed greeting that he would usually give, but a tone that conveyed a sense of pity.

Liliana half gasped and half sighed. In the end, he hadn’t given up. Even though she’d told him to, though in a roundabout way. Yes, today when they met this afternoon, she’d told him that it was dangerous to get involved with her. That he wouldn’t just get away with light wounds the next time.

“Sorry ’bout that. You went out of your way to warn me, and it was all wasted effort.”

Hearing him say that, she felt like her thoughts were being read, and her heart skipped a beat.

“Hey, you’re Liliana, right?”

And just as her heart settled down from the previous shock, that question hit her. How did he know? She was never imprudent in hiding her identity. However, his eyes were filled with conviction when he asked. Those eyes said he wasn’t mistaken. That it would be useless to feign ignorance.

“How... did you find out?”

“You know, one way or another.”

And despite his ambivalent wording, his answer was direct and with no hesitation. He followed up by asking her a question of his own.

“Why are you doing this kind of thing? Even if you’re part of a special department that manipulates information, there’s no way causing these incidents is part of your job as a soldier, right?”

“There’s no need... for me to tell you that. About why I’m doing this, about myself... None of it concerns you. If you want to hear it no matter what... then...”

With that, Liliana manifested the mana that she had been accumulating. In an instant, the surroundings were dominated by dense mana. The brick walls of buildings and the very road began bubbling as if exposed to chemicals. She was prepared for battle. And he also seemed to know the meaning of that.

“Ask by force, is it?”

Having discerned that answer, without responding to her mana, Suimei Yakagi began speaking without hesitation once more.

“Even so, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“To quietly... get caught? Or that... what I’m doing is wrong?”

“No. Whether what you’re doing is right or wrong isn’t for me to judge. If you don’t tell me whether the guys you cast magic on are bad, or whether you’re bad, then ultimately I have no way of knowing, and whatever I have to say about it wouldn’t be a reason to stop you.”

“Then...”

“But still, there’s something I don’t approve of. And that’s the magic you’re using.”

“Dark magic...?”

“That’s right, Liliana. At the very least, stop using that magic. It’s something humans should never touch for the sake of remaining human.”

“On what basis are...”

“If it’s a proper reason you’re after, I do have one. And if you want to hear it, I’ll tell you.”

“You don’t have any right... to say that to me. I will just do... what it is that I must. That’s why...”

Yes, that’s why... she would she strike him down here? To defend herself, using the excuse that it was for that person’s sake, would she cast dark magic on him again? Even though he wasn’t one of those nobles who were her enemies?

“...Ugh.”

With all those thoughts spinning in her head, her chanting lips faltered. Was this really okay? The dark whirlpool of doubt threatened to consume her. But she’d already chosen her path and started to run down it. And until she finished running down this path, or until somebody stopped her, there was no going back.

“Oh Darkness. Thou art the fleeting black which paints this world far and wide. Mix into magnificence, transform it all to sinisterness, and pluck the sprouts of fate. Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron...”

After the chant, she hummed the savage names, and then let fly the keywords of her spell.

“Transient Hope.”

Immediately following that, all the shadows and darkness of the night coalesced in the form of swelling spheres. The many bubbles rising up in the air began to blot out the townscape, the stars, and all the light. Though they took irregular trajectories, they all flooded in unerringly towards Suimei Yakagi. He watched the bubbles come for

him without a hint of impatience. He then calmly opened his mouth at the right moment.

“ΑΣΚΙ ΚΑΤΑΣΚΙ ΛΙΞ ΤΕΤΡΑΞ ΔΑΜΝΑΜΕΝΕΥΣ ΑΙΣΙΟΝ...”

He was then buried in the dark bubbles. Not even the moonlight could reach him now.

So was that it? Out of all her dark magic, this was an especially powerful spell. Against someone who'd been unable to block her spell last time, this was something that he could never defend against. And when the bubbles of darkness scattered, he would be left there on the ground, covered in countless wounds, his entire body blackened for eternity. All he would be able to do was to eventually lay down life's burden while trembling. Yes, without a doubt.

“...Stupid.”

Was that intended for him, or for herself? That small curse with an unknown destination vanished into the darkness. This outcome was naturally not what she really wanted. However, she had no choice but to unleash a fierce attack like that. If her opponent was unwilling to yield to her, she had to make him submit. However even so, the remnants of regret that lingered in her heart pierced her chest. Suimei might have been the first friend she'd ever made. But in the end, that feeling vanished into the black bubbles.

“So... stupid...”

Before long, the magic was welcoming its end. The propagation of the dark bubbles came to a sudden stop, and they began dissipating into the darkness from whence they'd come. However, as the darkness broke apart, the figure of Suimei Yakagi collapsed on the laid out bricks... wasn't what she saw.

“Ah...”

The first thing she saw was a brilliant magic circle firing off a white light. Filled with unfamiliar crests and words, it was beautifully drawn. Had it protected its owner from the darkness that was supposed to strike him down? Above it was a space without a single shadow or cloud illuminated by the moonlight. And just as Liliana thought that she heard the delightful sound of fingers snapping, the remaining dark bubbles rose into the sky as if blown away by that shock wave.

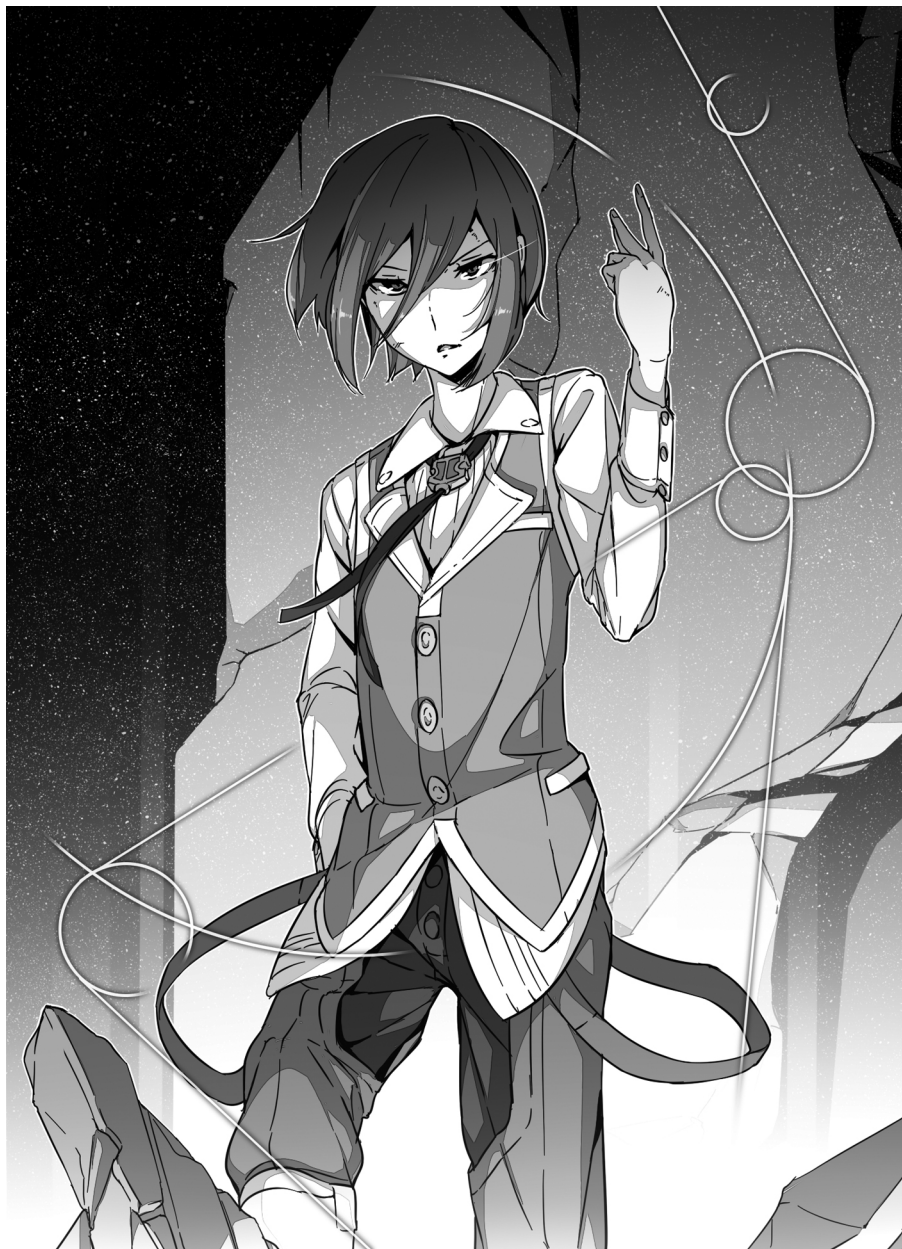
Before long, as if she was recovering her sense of time, the sounds of her surroundings returned to her. The trees and shrubs began to rustle as if they were frightened by something. Rubble clattered across the ground as if it was laughing. The red brick walls and hedges, the black steel spikes, and the silver gates... Everything had lost its color and become part of one giant, dull, ashen painting.

The area was suddenly flooded with the cool, crisp air of an autumn night. The moon took on a reddish tint as it looked down on

her. And then, in the center of all of that...

“That magic won’t work on me anymore, you know? Left-Hand Sorcerer.”

Gazing at her strongly with crimson eyes was the visage of a magician.





On this evening, there were two points that Suimei kept in mind as he dealt with the core of the incidents once more.

This would be the third time he had an encounter with the culprit after dark. The first thing he kept in mind was that he now knew the identity of said culprit. The second was that the two of them would be alone this time.

Right now, neither Felmenia nor Lefille were present. For the sake of persuading Liliana, he'd asked them to refrain from tagging along this time. If they had her outnumbered, it was possible she'd try and run away.

"No way... How...?"

Presumably because he'd completely defended against her powerful dark magic attack, he could hear a childish bewildered voice slip her lips.

The *magicka* he'd used was defensive *magicka*. A spell from the charm engraved into the belt of the goddess of the moon, Diana of Ephesus. Gods were, so to speak, existences whose bodies were composed of substances closely resembling the astral, aetheric, and the like. And since this was a charm to protect a god, it was effective against attacks which targeted the astral body. *Aski, kataski, lix, tetrax, damnameneus, aision*. Darkness, brightness, earth, the year, the sun, and reason. With those words, malice in the higher dimension was blocked by their power. Normally, it was *magicka* that was rarely used. So infrequently, in fact, that it could be said that it was never used in respectable fights between fellow magicians.

But on a moonlit night like this, the *magicka* manifested its effects quite well. Now, in regards to the dark magic that failed to exert its destructive force due to this *magicka*...

"The Element of darkness was something talked about quite frequently. The guys who used this system of *magicka* likely weren't sure right until the very end what its origin truly was."

After Suimei let out a sigh, Liliana knit her brow and gave him a disagreeing looking.

"What... are you even saying? The Element of darkness... is a servant of the Goddess... and one of the powers of a mage."

"Nope, it's not what all of you think it is. Every last one of you seems to misunderstand it. That's why, like you just saw, I have means of defending against it."

"Ugh... Oh Darkness. Thou art sharp like the lightning that races across the sky. Thrust of Darkness!"

Liliana let loose another spell. It was straightforward, but stressed

speed. However, in situations like this, relying on dark magic that took advantage of the darkness that obscured an opponent's vision was an established tactic. The spell of a mage who relied on such basic tricks would never hit Suimei as he stood in the moonlight. He strode forward with confidence, and then trifled with her.

He snapped his fingers as he took a step towards Liliana, and the bricks at her feet exploded. Her eyes shot wide open in surprise like her expectations had been betrayed, and she stood upright like a bolt.

"When I first ate that thing, I generally had a rough idea of what it was. There aren't all that many things that can directly and seriously affect the astral body, after all. Mysteries caused by wielding the power of wicked gods using Goetia. Suicide attacks carried out by demonomists devoted to their faith. Intrinsic curses. Hexes. The attacks of apparitions. And out of all the possibilities, the one considered to be the most antiquated technique is the one that uses thoughts of hate, resentment, and envy towards the target to directly strike at them. It's so simple that it doesn't even require a spell, but those hateful thoughts are powerful, and their effects were observed by many in ancient indigenous faiths."

"What... kind of relation are you saying that has... with the power that I use?!"

"Are you listening? The thing called the 'Element of darkness' doesn't exist. Just as stated in the saying 'the hatred and resentment harbored by man becomes a curse and causes a real effect on the body,' the overflowing curse of hatred that has nowhere to go in the transient world ends up coagulating in the astral plane."

The oldest form of a curse. That is, namely, a mass of hatred harbored by people, beings, animals, and the like. Since hatred existed everywhere, it could be used as an attack as long as there was a target to receive the emotion. This was why the rampart of the golden fortress was penetrated. Ramparts were ramparts. They were defensive walls, but they offered no protection from thoughts. If it had been weak magic, then the spell inserted into it would be defended against, and the curse would be dealt with by his natural resistance as a magician. But if the curse surpassed that resistance, he had no way of blocking the maliciousness that broke through. And that was only all the more true with more powerful magics. The difference with the power the demons wielded lay in this point.

Suimei once more defended against a spell fired at him in irritation, and continued speaking, unfazed.

"However, normally, that kind of thing can't be used by just anyone. A single fragment would be a different story, but hatred and resentment often guide humans to ruin. They're essentially the bane of humanity. However, there is one type of user that can wield it freely.

And that's someone whose heart sympathizes with hatred and resentment. In other words, you as you are now."

"Are you saying I harbor such feelings?"

"I bet you do. From the odds and ends of your speech and conduct up until now, and the fact that you can use that magic, it's something I put together. You yourself may not be self-aware of it, though."

"That kind of thing—"

"Isn't true, you mean? But you know, the proof of it is under your glove. Because you wield the power of coagulated resentment and hatred, and you sympathize with it, it alters the extremities of your body that are easy to encroach on. It's likely that what's under your eyepatch is the same, right? Under the influence of continuing to submerge your body into negative power, your form is deviating from that of a normal human."

Liliana instinctively put her hand over her eyepatch.

"That's right. The art you're using is the art of curses that humans shouldn't lay their hands on. Even if I didn't tell you that, you who uses it would know better than me, right?"

"But if... if I didn't have this magic... I, I would..."

"Stop it. That magic will destroy your body. It's not too late now. Stop using dark magic, and prioritize healing your body. If you don't, then one day you will no longer be yourself! So..."

"So..."

Just as Liliana seemed like she was about to give in, the malice she sympathized with began swaying behind her like a heat haze. And as if that brought her to her senses, her eye suddenly shot wide open.

"Urgh, so what?! I know that full well! I at least know that... if I keep using this magic... one day I'll be swallowed by the darkness! But that has absolutely nothing to do with you, does it?! So why... why are you fussing over someone like me?!"

"Because as a magician, I can't accept you walking that path."

Yes, the path of magicka that led to dark magic... It was something referred to by mysticology as the left-hand path. The word "sinister" came from the Latin "sinistra," meaning left. So sinister magicians who walked down the path of ruin by manipulating immorality and evil spirits were often said to walk the left-hand path. Even in the world of magicka, that was considered to be a bad choice. That's why Suimei couldn't let her just continue down that road.

"Also, it's 'cause I'm a whimsical busybody."

And as Suimei flashed a troubled smile her way, Liliana looked as though she was completely taken aback. As if grilling her for her true feelings, Suimei once more spoke up.

"Hey, are you okay with living this kind of life?"

"What...?"

“Destroying your own body. There isn’t a single good side to it, right? You may not have regrets about it, but if you keep using dark magic, you’ll never become happy, you know?”

As if trying to shake away all the words reaching her ears, Liliana violently shook her head.

“But if I do that, I won’t be able to fight! And if I can’t fight, I’m not needed by this country! Even the Colonel won’t need me! Ever since mom and dad abandoned me, I’ve been alone! Being picked up by the Colonel and coming to the Empire... For the first time, I had a place I belonged! Even if I ended up being called the human weapon! Even if everyone detested me! If I don’t have dark magic, I’ll... I’ll... Again, I’ll be...”

“But is all that really okay?!”

“?!”

“It’s not, is it?! Was this what you really wanted?! To live this painful life?!”

Yes, even Liliana should have had something she wanted. She should have something she desired deep in her heart. And that was definitely not this place of only pain. Seeing her innocent smile earlier that afternoon, Suimei knew that what she really wanted wasn’t utter ruin and misfortune.

“What... I wanted...”

“That’s right. What you wanted is—”

Suimei once more called for her to come to her senses. However, Liliana...

“Shut up! If nobody needs me unless I can fight, then I’m fine being like this forever!”

She rejected what he was saying with stronger emotions than she’d shown before now, and yelled out a near howl. With that, the darkness clad around her went berserk.

“A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-AH!”

The darkness billowing from her like smoke was a curse. No, it was malice. The pent up resentment that congealed in the astral world, using Liliana’s body as a relay, manifested with dreadful vigor. Naturally, it was because it sympathized with Liliana’s heart. Using her shout that embodied her hatred for the way the world was, it turned her emotions inside out.

“Stop it! Don’t take in the darkness on your own, damn it!”

A massive amount of malice burst out from her feet, and Liliana was sucking it all up. In an attempt to save her, Suimei ran forth with no concern for his own wellbeing.

“Guuu-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-AH!”

Perhaps having been brought back to her senses by Suimei’s shriek of anguish, Liliana’s eye shot wide open.

“Wh-What are you...”

“Don’t take it in... You can’t. That path... isn’t one you should walk down...”

“S-Stop it. If you get closer, even you will be...!”

Darkness, curses, and malice seeped into Suimei’s body. It was a strong and concentrated power that could not even be compared to the dark magic that Liliana had used on him. It was apparent that if he didn’t steel his mind, even his soul would be desecrated. But this was a race against time. He didn’t have time to postpone any actions as he began chanting for defenses from the moon. Even as Liliana screamed for him to save himself, Suimei continued to try to help her.

“Lucem sacrum implebis, nunc perfectam formam appetes... Gah.”

[Fill with the sacred radiance, seek out the ideal figure...]

Suimei recited the chant from memory to drive away the curses while keeping his eyes shut. In just that much of a fluster, he could clearly feel the sensation of cold sweat pouring from his forehead down to his nose and cheeks. The dreadful vigor of the enormous curse was not weakening. As Suimei tried to pull Liliana away, the darkness surging forth assaulted his body.

“Gah, ah... Ah... You damn—!”

Mustering all his power with sheer willpower, Suimei’s hand reached Liliana and grabbed her. And using that momentum to forcefully throw her to the side, he tossed her out of the vortex of curses. Liliana rolled across the ground, and Suimei collapsed. Realizing what was going on, Liliana got up dumbfounded and approached Suimei.

“Suimei Yakagi...?”

“You idiot... No matter how you put it, you were gonna die there...”

After adding on a few choice curse words, Suimei began gasping, but still showed her a laughing face. Seeing him like this, Liliana realized her own foolishness and fell to her knees helplessly.

“I’m... sorry...”

“Seriously... I’m begging you, just calm down and keep still...”

Saying that, Suimei glossed it over with a pale smile that told her to just relax. Now that Liliana wasn’t being consumed by the darkness, she could relax. He took a breath and quietly got up, but things wouldn’t end so easily.

“What—”

“Huh?”

The world suddenly shook. It was a huge quake that seemed to combine both vertical and horizontal shaking, but even as he ran his gaze over the surroundings, nothing was moving despite all the shaking. The trees, the fallen pebbles, everything was all quietly

settled where it was sitting. That meant this was no normal earthquake. It was...

Manafield vibration...

“Tch... Did too much malice accumulate?”

Watching the world that wouldn't stop shaking, Suimei spat a curse. Presently, the townscape in this other world was being shaken, a side effect of a normally impossible phenomenon occurring, or a power that far overstepped its boundaries taking shape. The malice that spilled forth using Liliana as a relay had swelled up beyond the limits of what a single space could withstand. If it was that serious, it was likely that the coagulated malice would gain directionality and take on a form.

Before long, just as Suimei predicted, things were converging both visually and audibly in that extreme direction. The haze made up of malice gradually projected a darkness tinged with a dark purple different from the deep hues of the night sky as it lurked in the air. The silhouette, which still had not taken a clear shape, let out a shrill voice of sorrow, and a deep and heavy voice of envy. It planted a discomfort that could never be forgotten in the minds of all who heard it, and sent a bitter chill running down their spines.

“Th-That's...”

“It's manifesting. Step back...”

The space where it was about to manifest billowed out lightning. It was a portent that happened from time to time. And without any pause, the malice took on a shape and became concrete.

What swooped down on them then was a repulsive figure. With no texture, its body was a pitch black silhouette that was far too smooth. It had limbs hanging down from it as if its skeleton had been removed. A crude, slimy substance covered its surface. Embedded in the right side of what appeared to be its head was a single blood-colored light that imitated an eyeball. This mold that looked like a personification of the ugliness of humanity was like an artlessly drawn picture. But there was perhaps no better design for a creature such as this.

“A-Aah...”

“Don't lend your ear to its voice. You'll get pulled in.”

Being struck by the unpleasant feelings caused by its far too repulsive wail, Liliana's body trembled. Since she was the one who evoked it, it was easy for her to be influenced by it. Knowing that, Suimei clasped his hand on her shoulder. He held back her mind and body that were being called over.

The sinful figure moved. The bricks it touched with what appeared to be its feet all blackened. As it drew closer, the air became tainted with malice. Just from taking a single step forward, the influence wrought by this creature was unfathomable. And witnessing

that, Liliana raised a distressed voice.

“W-We have to run... That’s... We can’t...”

What was being stirred up fiercely within her was dread. Any normal person would die of fright to stand before such a creature. Because she had an admiration and understanding of magic, she could truly appreciate the situation she was in and what she was facing.

“What good will running away do? This thing can’t be left at large.”

“But, it’s impossible... How would you suggest we even get rid of it? Besides, with your body like that...”

“When you say something’s impossible, I’m just the kind of guy who wants to give it a try.”

And as Suimei daringly stated that, as if trying to unravel human speech, the creature shrieked.

Its repulsive voice that rang out through the residential area became a shock wave and assaulted their bodies. Obstructed by the wall of malice, the sound didn’t leak outside of the darkness, but someone would eventually sense the unusual phenomenon. The terrible creature strode forth. Both its voice and appearance were enough to drive living beings mad. The city would become a living hellscape if it got on the loose. That had to be avoided at all costs.

The sinful figure leaped forward. Its movements were unlike that of a human running on two legs and more like those of an animal running on all fours. It was like it was striking the ground with all its strength as it leaped, and reacting to its strange movements, Suimei gently lifted Liliana in the air with magicka and moved her over to a hedge.

Then, matching the leaping figure, Suimei jumped back. It would be bad if he was hit. No matter what it touched, be it the bricks it landed on or the walls it struck, it was clear what would happen. With each bounding step, the shadow closed in like it was spreading out. Firing strike magicka at it, once, twice, three, and then four times... It was completely unperturbed by the snapping of Suimei’s fingers, and he was forced to leap to the side to get away.

Contrary to expectation, the terrible creature didn’t give chase. It was beyond the concept of a proper fight. It wasn’t like it was rushing at Suimei in the first place. It was just running amok. It was just digging its claws into reality. It just wanted to increase the same kind of misfortune it represented. No matter where it went, it was pure malice, plain and simple.

The figure then artlessly swept its giant, black, gummy-like arm. The end of that cylindrical limb that couldn’t really be called a hand gave birth to wind, and as it formed a gale with both arms, one could see the destructive power it possessed as the walls and bricks on the

ground crumbled to pieces.

As Suimei put up both his arms to protect himself, he analyzed the situation through the gap in his arms while enduring the shock waves and flying pebbles. When the figure before his eyes stopped swinging around its arms, Suimei unleashed lightning from his fingertips with his hand shaped like a blade. Quietly muttering “Abreq ad Habra” and unleashing his pale spearhead of magicka, it collided against the sinful figure and dispersed. All it did was cause a single spasm. Because it was impromptu, its effect was diluted. The terrible creature then immediately regained its footing, but remained where it was while letting its limbs just dangle loosely.

“Look. It’s certain that thing is made by uniting all forms of malice. However, since it’s a mix of all kinds of malice and emotions, it can’t settle on what it wants to do. That’s why its movements are so abnormal. There’s no need to fear it more than necessary.”

“But...”

“Don’t be so fainthearted. If you’re entranced by it, then that in itself will be the end.”

When one’s gaze was seized by that sinful figure, the latent dread within them would be stirred up.

Yes, this was the fetters of sin that bound the hearts of men. It prowled, looking for any openings in those hearts. A filthy existence that all would run from. It was something that existed beyond this plane. Something that never should have been brought to this world. An evil influence.

The sinful figure was still clamoring in a grating voice. Liliana sealed her ears as if pinning down her head, and was frantic to distract herself from that voice as she shook her head. She finally looked like a girl her age. One that should never be allowed to be eaten away by the worms of malice.

That’s why, no matter what state I’m in...

“I can’t back down.”

The sinful figure began moving again. Raising a high-pitched, shrill scream like something was scratching sharp metal, it ran down as it tore up the ground. It was a super charge attack like an incoming meteor. Everything before it seemed frozen in time, and endless debris was kicked up behind it. If Suimei were hit by it, he wouldn’t get off lightly. Using his eyes sharpened with magicka, Suimei devoted himself entirely to evasion, however...

“Gu... ugh...”

Pain ran through his whole body. It was from saving Liliana from going berserk, but the malice that was eating away at his body chose the worst time to scream out. And because of that pain, Suimei lost his chance to evade. He felt like he blacked out for a few seconds. By the

time he regained his senses, the monster was practically upon him.

“Then it’s fine if I don’t dodge...”

What he etched with his right hand shaped as a blade was a Thelema Hexagram. The sweat on his cheeks dripped to the ground. And in the face of that unending anguish, he bared his fangs. Liliana was screaming something, but right now, Suimei couldn’t hear her. He had steeled his mind. He was determined to destroy this embodiment of malice. He continued to stabilize the mana at his fingertips. Right now, it was nighttime. He couldn’t use the Bless Blade. The Azure Engraved Beheading would also be impossible to manifest. He had to select the right magicka. As he did, silence loomed. Eventually all noise seemed to stop, and within that stretched-out few seconds, there was only Suimei and his opponent.

Wind brushed his cheek.

“Don’t just fucking graze me.”

All that was left after he unintentionally spat out those words was the sinful figure running past him, and Suimei with his blade-like hand stuck out as though he’d pierced through the hexagram. It even slowed down, but the terrible creature fell, tumbled across the brickwork sidewalk, broke apart, and dissipated into the darkness of the sky.

The one to attain victory as they crossed within a hair’s breadth was Yakagi Suimei.

And as the sinful figure vanished, the heavy air sweeping over the surroundings dispersed. In that moment, the fatigue from the battle and the pain from the malice eating away at his body suddenly assaulted Suimei. Suppressing that feeling as best he could, he approached Liliana and sat down.

“It’s over.”

Perhaps Liliana was unable to believe what happened before her very eyes. They were wide open in surprise, and she looked between Suimei and the place where the terrible creature had vanished.

“Tell me your story... Why are you doing these things...?”

“Th-That’s... The nobles are trying to cause harm to the Colonel. That’s why... that person suggested...”

“That person? That other guy who was with you...?”

Leaving the effect of the malice to run its course, Suimei did his best to put those words together. He could then hear the sound of the military police signal whistles in the distance. When the sinful figure manifested, it transformed the surrounding area into a spirit world, so it wasn’t like they would have heard the uproar that happened here. So why...

Surprised by the footsteps and angry voices that were drawing nearer, Liliana’s shoulders jumped up. And before long, with Elliot in

the lead, Christa and a group of military policemen appeared.

“This way!”

Elliot’s beautiful, gender-neutral voice rang out. He surveyed the area immediately upon arriving, and beheld the collapsed figure of Suimei with Liliana with a bewildered expression.

“Suimei Yakagi, and if I am not mistaken...”

“Why... are you all...”

Just as Suimei was in the middle of asking that, he realized that Liliana was agitatedly trembling. She suddenly took several steps back. The hustle and bustle of Elliot and the military police. The malice she’d taken into her that brought on this incident. All of it pushed her to her limits.

“Shit, what bad timing...”

Suimei groaned at the bitterness suddenly spreading throughout his mouth. At this rate, with all these needless guys butting in, he wouldn’t be able to have a calm conversation with Liliana. As the situation gradually deteriorated, Suimei got up from the ground.

“Whatever. It looks like it’ll become a little troublesome, but let’s go, Liliana.”

“I...”

Suimei stretched his hand out to Liliana as she reached heights of bewilderment. And just then...

“Is it fine to leave like this? If you stop here, your goal won’t be accomplished, you know...”

When that voice reached her, Liliana’s body shook. Looking up, she spied the tall shadow standing on a rooftop.

“You’re—?!”

Suimei raised his voice, but the tall shadow paid him no mind and again addressed Liliana.

“What will you do? I don’t mind either way... But that’s not the case for you, right?”

“H-Hnngh...”

“You can’t! Don’t listen!”

“Go.”

The tall shadow pointed in the opposite direction. Was it telling Liliana to head that way? Not a moment later, a sudden gust kicked up a puff of dust and dirt into the air. Elliot and Christa immediately began to handle the situation calmly, but the military police were shaken by it and lost their composure.

“Shit—Urgh!”

Suimei couldn’t move. When he tried to step forward, his body denied him. It was because of the malice he’d taken on when he saved Liliana and the damage he’d taken when crossing blades with that terrible creature. He’d done one unreasonable thing after another, and

was paying the price for it. He could no longer do anything. Liliana, on the other hand, simply didn't seem to know what to do in the hectic situation. She trembled in confusion, and then...

“Ah, UaaaAAAAAH!”

Screaming as if to block out everything that had just happened, she fled down the hill in the direction the tall shadow had pointed and vanished into the darkness of the night.

“Ugh... Liliana... Don't go...”

Clutching his chest and gasping in anguish, Suimei weakly reached out for her as she ran. And then, at the crest of the hill, the tall shadow appeared as if to stand in his way.

“You fucker...”

In response to Suimei's groaned curse, it looked like the mouth of the tall shadow twisted into a sneer.

Epilogue

The tall shadow who helped Liliana escape concluded its confrontation with Suimei and the others, and was now spying on them milling about in confusion with a taunting grin. It was now standing atop the second highest building in all the Empire, the Filas Philia Cathedral bell tower. Careful to elude Suimei Yakagi's unusual senses, it was observing the scene from on high. The military police had surrounded the area. The hero rushed over to Suimei. While asking about the situation, his attendant was about to cast healing magic on him, but Suimei seemed to have firmly rejected it. The tall shadow began to gather its thoughts on what action to take from here.

As things stood, this was the second blunder they made. Concerning the military police, the hero's power posed a considerable threat, but it was still fine to leave them be. With the current situation, they would all be quite stalled, after all.

But Suimei Yakagi... That man could not be underestimated. Who would have thought that while the shadow was disturbing the movements of the hero's group, that he would once more catch on to Liliana's movements and make contact with her?

"Hmph..."

The tall shadow did not know what had happened within Liliana's dark domain, but as Suimei had met her already on several occasions, it was likely he was in the middle of trying to convince her to abandon her magic. Thinking about it like that, this was a dangerous situation.

However, even this danger was not something for the shadow to fret over. After being struck with so much dark magic, he would die... No, there was a chance that he would recover, but even then, he would be incapacitated for quite some time. There would likely be an effect after using his magic too.

This time, they had not seen the noble being attacked, but Liliana's face was seen by both Suimei Yakagi and the hero. In that case...

"That little girl's use has just about..."

With that cold murmur, the tall shadow vanished into the darkness.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind* and giving the afterword a look. Thank you very much; I will write it as many times as I have to. I am Gamei Hitsuji. To everyone who's continued reading from volumes 1 and 2, it's good to write to all of you again.

This time around, I was once more able to get a volume of *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind* out into the world safely because of everyone who has earnestly read the books and everyone who's read the web novel version. So, well, how do I put it...? Thank you very much!

Just as I was thinking that my slow writing pace was a bit of a problem, I incidentally began browsing the net looking to up my pace...

"I wrote one book in three days."

"I put out 17 books in one year."

"I write two hundred pages a day."

It's like... they're not human or something.

They're too amazing. I hardly know what to say. Or rather, there won't be any end to it, so let's leave it at that.

Now then, it's about time we touched on the story this time around.

In the third volume of the series, Suimei-kun, who's off on a journey in another world looking to find a way back to his own, has finally set up his base. All's well, or so he thinks. Then he's once more dragged into an incident. It's quite unfortunate, isn't it?

Continuing from last time, Lefille has been tagging along as his traveling companion. More specifically, Suimei's working with her to dispel her curse, so maybe it's better to say that Suimei-kun is the one who's been tagging along as a traveling companion, but anyway...

While thinking about what a nice feeling the tiny Lefille adds to the story with her cuteness and antics, I'm the weird author who was grinning at their computer while typing away.

Oh, and for those saying, "But the bigger Lefille-chan was better!" ...My apologies. But please be patient. She'll be back eventually.

This volume also finally brings back the heroine from the first volume, Felmenia Stingray. I thought I should highlight her clumsy and incompetent side more and more from here on out.

We also have a new character, the true loli (Lefille is the fake loli), Liliana Zandyke. She's an important character in the dark magic plot this time around. Her most memorable scene at the end of the day is probably the scene of her playing with cats, right? A cute little girl playing around with adorable kitties. Just thinking about it, an indescribable warmth spreads through my heart... What's that? That's not the important part? I guess you're right.

Somehow even though I said I would touch on the story, all we've been talking about is the characters.

Now then, our battle last time was against demons, but this time around, just as the title *The Magic in This World is Too Far Behind!* implies, we have magicka from the modern times clashing with the magic from another world. It really feels like we can say now that the magic in this world is too far behind!

The attribute of darkness that doesn't exist in the modern world. An element that doesn't connect to earth, water, fire and wind. A truly unknown original energy of this strange new world... Just what is it? Suimei-kun is incited to try and find out. My, I'm finally able to write about something like that, huh?

"He came to another world, but there's no stinking other world magic."

"Just where are you contrasting the knowledge of the modern era and the magic of this other world?"

After generating some content that addresses those questions, I hope that's something that is now properly conveyed to my dear readers.

Other than that, well, the tiny Lefille, the puppy Menia, the cats and Liliana... There's a lot of content I am rather proud of. Last time there wasn't much downtime in the story, so this time around, it would make me happy if you all got to enjoy the more relaxed portions.

But for now, this volume ends right in the middle of things. And, well, I'm in the middle of piecing together the ties between volumes three and four. So although things have been left in a somewhat unclear state, Liliana's unresolved subplot and the introduction of new characters will likely all be handled in the fourth volume.

...Also, just what will happen to me now that my stock has run out? Well, I got the third volume out safely, so it'll probably be alright from now on.

So that's how it is. To all of you waiting for volume four, please wait with peace of mind.

This time as well, to all of you who picked up this book; to all those who have warmly watched over *The Magic in this World is Too Far Behind!* in web form; to chief editor S-sama; the illustrator

himesuz-sama; the designer Horiehideaki-sama; the proofreading company Oraido-sama; and to everyone in the Overlap editorial department for safely putting out the third volume, I offer you my heartfelt thanks.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Stories

Felmenia, Bath Addict

After putting his lab in order, Suimei left the room and could hear a melody with a light rhythm to it coming from somewhere nearby.

“Hmm, hmmmh, hmhm!”

Drawn towards the source of the sound, Suimei discovered Felmenia humming with a broad grin on her face as she left her room.

“Menia, you look awfully happy. What’s up?”

“Indeed, I was just thinking about taking a bath.”

Felmenia hugged a towel to her chest as she declared her intentions. Seeing her in such high spirits, Suimei couldn’t help the bit of smug laughter that escaped his lips.

“Oh yeah? So you really were just knocking it without trying it, huh?”

“Yes. I never thought that a bath would be such a nice thing.”

She didn’t deny it. Up until moving in with Suimei, she had never gotten into anything like a bath. The one she’d taken two days ago was her very first one. Before getting in, she’d stubbornly refused, but once she was actually in the water, it seemed she’d changed her mind about it. Pondering that, Suimei posed Felmenia a question.

“If I remember right, it’s not typical to take baths in Astel, right?”

“It is just as you say. Heehee, the people of Astel have been missing out on a third of their lives.”

“It’s something I’ve been wondering about, but why is that?”

Suimei had doubts as to why the people of this world hadn’t taken to bathing. Not only did a bath cleanse the mind and spirit, but it was certainly more effective than the sponge baths they favored. Bathing had a great significance to the Japanese, and though there was a period in the West where it fell out of favor, it was considered a pastime in many cultures. In general, anywhere civilization blossomed had bathing customs. But the only places in this world that had developed bathing culture were Noshias and the Empire.

“Regarding that, it is related to an enormous war that took place several hundred years ago.”

“A war from several hundred years ago...? I think Lefi said something about that once.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, something about a war that led to the Empire losing its

power.”

“Yes, the Heathen War. It was caused by the country where the self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance is currently located... Ah, Reiji-dono also seemed to have misunderstood this, but I should mention that the self-governed state is independent from the Alliance countries. After that war, the Saadias Alliance restored the ruined land as an independent state, which is how it came to be what it is today... Oh, I seem to have gotten a little off topic. I digress, but that was the Heathen War.”

Facing Felmenia as she politely taught him all this, Suimei raised his hand like a student.

“Excuse me, Sensei! How is that war related to bathing?”

“According to literature and oral tradition, the tyrant who brought about that war cast a curse on water, or so it seems.”

“A curse?”

“It was several hundred years ago, so I am not all that familiar with the details, but it seems the wells and even the streams going into enemy nations were all cursed. Just touching them was enough to make you sick.”

“And so the people became afraid of it. But a curse on water, huh?”

“I do not know whether it conforms to the spells of your world, but to wreak that effect on the water in faraway countries, I suspect it would have to be infection or sensory resonance magicka.”

“So why did the culture of bathing remain in the Empire? If I’m not mistaken, the Empire suffered pretty big losses from that war too...”

“Bathing culture was strongly rooted in the Empire beforehand. It seems that, concentrating their efforts on facilities for their water supply, they were able to safeguard their traditions even throughout the crisis. In Astel, however, the people had a strong aversion to water in the first place. So since there were alternatives like sponge bathing, they naturally took that option.”

“So that’s how the customs ended up different...”

The water literally being cursed likely inflicted an incredible dread on the people back then. Even ignoring bathing, just drinking water could be a matter of life and death. And such fears are not easily conquerable. The people would’ve needed a strong affinity for bathing in the first place to get over something like that. Since baths were so nice, Suimei thought that much should be a given. At least, that’s what he thought as a man from Japan.

“I’ve heard the saying ‘a stream purified by the church is clean, but all standing water is corrupted’ many times before.”

“That’s quite interesting.”

With that, Suimei let out a sigh of admiration. What Felmenia had just said was similar to feng shui's way of thinking. As he pondered all this, he could hear the sound of quickly tottering footsteps approaching.

"Suimei-kuuun!"

It was Lefille.

"Oh, Lefi. What's up?"

"Save meee!"

Shouting for him in a not all too pressing manner, she showed up covered in cats. She had some hanging down from her arms and shoulders, and even some clinging to her legs. For a certain type of person, there would be no greater happiness than this.

"I don't know what to do. The cats you brought back are all too attached to people. Thanks to that, I'm all furry again."

"W-Well, yeah. Should I say sorry, or...? How do I put it...?"

The cats that Suimei brought back all came with him after reaching a mutual understanding with him. They weren't shy, and just as Lefille said, they were attached to people. So whenever Felmenia or Lefille were nice to them, they would end up something like this.

Felmenia helped peel the cats off of Lefille. And using magicka to summon a brush, Suimei began brushing the cat hair off of Lefille. She trembled softly like it tickled.

"Phew. Thanks, both of you."

"Don't mention it. Now, it is about time that I..."

"Are you going somewhere, Lady Felmenia?"

"I was just about to take a bath."

Lefille then cocked her head to the side.

"Didn't you take one this morning, Lady Felmenia?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"Huh...?"

Hearing Felmenia admit to it, Suimei's mouth hung open. Seeing this, Felmenia questioned him in a curious tone.

"Is something the matter?"

"It's not really a big deal, but..."

Seeing his face scrunch up, Lefille spoke up as if she meant to answer on his behalf.

"I'm also very happy that you ended up loving baths, but if you go in day and night so often, your body will swell up, you know?"

"But doesn't it feel good?"

"That's certainly true, but there's a limit to it, right?"

Being admonished by Lefille, Felmenia went on to explain that she didn't think it was a problem.

"There are those in the Empire who bathe three times a day, so compared to that, I do believe what I'm doing is within the

permissible limits. Besides, soaking in a bath is healthy and puts one in a good mood.”

“Well, it is good for your circulation,” Suimei added. “It also facilitates your metabolism, so it’s good for your health. I’ve also heard that it’s good for your skin and—”

“Really?!”

“Is that true?!”

“Huh? I mean, well, it’s just something people say.”

With the two of them biting at that morsel of information so voraciously, Suimei faltered. It was true that was something people said, but when it came to the benefits of bathing, there were differing opinions on the matter. It was often claimed that just soaking in up to the hips was good for you, but more recently, Suimei had heard people question if long baths could give you a cold. There’d been no medical proof of that, however, so people were coming to disregard it. But still, it wasn’t like they knew everything there was to know about it.

“Lady Felmenia, if you don’t mind, I would like to go in ahead of you...”

“No, I will not yield. I will go first.”

But the next thing Suimei knew, they were disputing who would get to take the first bath.

A Small Tea Party with Alexis

On a certain day, Suimei was visiting a certain mansion on the Scandinavian peninsula of Sweden. Upon arriving in Northern Europe, he’d done some quick sightseeing in Djurgarden before arriving at his objective. There, he was greeted by a considerably robust butler and guided to a luxurious garden on the property.

Sitting down at a circular table in a snowy white gazebo, he had a grand view of the principle residence. As for the reason he was there in the first place...

“It is good of you to visit, Starlight.”

He could hear a voice call out to him from the granite path that led to the gazebo. It was noble and ladylike, but also tender. It was the voice of the magicka knight of the Chivalric Order of the Rose Cross, Alexis Van Meizan. Whenever he saw her, she was ordinarily wearing her brilliant white and green armor based on the megingjord, but today, she was wearing a short skirt and had her platinum blonde hair tied up with a single ribbon.

“How many times do I gotta tell you to stop calling me that before you listen...?”

“I happen to think it is quite a chic way of addressing you.”

“Just how is it chic? Anyone who overheard that would just cringe, wouldn’t they? Call me by my name, damn it. I do have one.”

“Oh my. Then, Suimei, is it alright for me to call you by your first name?”

“I mean... I don’t really mind, but...”

“Heehee...”

Alexis smiled, looking quite delighted. With her acting so differently than usual, Suimei’s heart was racing just a little. Concealing that from showing on his face, however, he tried asking about the meaning behind her smile.

“What’s so funny?”

“It is nothing in particular. Frederic, some tea please.”

“Yes, my lady.”

At Alexis’s command, the butler who had been standing off to the side poured them some tea.

“The tea that Frederic makes is simply the best.”

“Mm...”

At her recommendation, Suimei took a taste of the expensive-looking tea. While stealing a glance at Alexis as he held the teacup to his mouth, she looked like an elegant and graceful lady. It was throwing him off a little. The tea, however, as she said, was delicious.

“Suimei, did you come here alone today?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Thank goodness for that. If Alzbayne’s youngest daughter or that delinquent little witch were here, there would be no rivalling the noise they would make.”

Alzbayne’s daughter was Hydemary, but Suimei had no idea who she was referring to with the strange moniker of “delinquent little witch.”

“Delinquent?”

“The gun witch with that mean look in her eyes. The one with the kitty.”

“Isrina? Well, she certainly does look kinda like a delinquent at a glance, but...”

“What is it?”

As Alexis gestured for him to continue, Suimei put down his teacup with a slight blush to his face.

“She only looks like that. Inside, she has an innocent heart.”

“Hmm? So that sort of girl is your taste?”

“Huh?! H-How did we get to that?!”

Being posed with a question like that out of the blue, Suimei was stumbling over himself. Alexis squinted her eyes as if assessing the meaning of his reaction.

“Oh my. If you panic like that, it only makes it more suspicious.”

“...B-But they’re not really related, right?”

“Well, you have a point.”

With that, Alexis set down her teacup and moved next to Suimei. Just as he was about to ask what she wanted, she leaned forward against the table, resting her heavy chest on top of it.

“Heehee...”

She then flashed him a bewitching smile.

“What...”

“I have already given you the right to call me by my name, so it would be fine for you to call me Alex, your big sister.”

“B-Big sister? We’re only two or three years apart, right?”

As Suimei objected and averted his gaze, the breasts she’d had resting on the table suddenly sprung up and leaned in towards him. As if mesmerized, Suimei couldn’t peel his eyes away. Alexis was a beauty. Moreover, she had an elegance about her today that was completely different from usual. It made her even more captivating. And when she got this close to him, it made even Suimei’s heart throb. However, even so, Suimei pushed back on Alexis’s shoulders.

“Give me a little space here.”

“Oh my, so I failed.”

Alexis took her distance with a dissatisfied look, then revealed an impish smile as she sat back down.

“Y-You’re... different than usual.”

“Of course I am. Whenever I meet with you, it is when I am fulfilling my duties for the Chivalric Order of the Rose Cross. At those times, I am a knight. But here, I am a daughter of the house of Meizan. Is it not natural for my behavior to change accordingly?”

“You’re saying you play roles?”

“It’s not quite to that extent. It’s just that, as a knight, I must be ferocious. Perhaps there have been times were I was just a little overzealous, but—”

Moving to counterattack, Suimei threw in a quick quip.

“You mean always?”

“Oh my, I couldn’t hear you properly. Did you say something?”

Alexis smiled as she formed a fist. In the end, that was without a doubt her true nature. And Suimei unconditionally surrendered.

“Nothing at all, my dear sister.”

“Very good.”

Seeing that they’d come to an understanding for now, Alexis nodded with a satisfied look. Her fists were something out of this world. When she threw a punch, the magicka she invoked was a gale of destruction. Even without the divine power of her armor and gauntlet, she could likely blow away a quarter of the mansion. Alexis then blushed a little as she continued.

“Well, whenever I meet with you, it reminds me of that time, and I become somewhat feverish.”

“What’s that? What time?”

“The red dragon subjugation in the Alpujarras.”

Those words brought back a wave of unpleasant memories for Suimei. Back then, in the Andalusia region of Spain, a red dragon had awakened—a mystical calamity on a grander scale than any in magicka’s history.

“At that time, when the sky and mountains of the Sierra Nevada were burned bright red, when all had fallen into despair... the beautiful light born of the sparkling stars struck down the enemy of man. It was among the best of the mysteries that man could conjure...”

“...”

Alexis was talking about it as if in a feverish dream. As if Enth Astrarle had been used just moments ago. And after she reminisced for a time, she seemed to realize the effect it had on Suimei.

“My apologies for my lack of consideration. That was when your father passed away...”

“No, I don’t really mind. But... is that why you call me by that name?”

“That is correct.”

“Seriously...?”

Normally that was where he would make a troubled expression, but Suimei shyly averted his eyes instead. If a magician of Alexis’s level said that it was because she was fascinated by his magicka, he couldn’t help the embarrassment creeping up on him.

“And that is why I will continue to call you Starlight.”

“I’m begging you. Please just use my name.”

Suimei brought his head down to the table weakly. And in response to that, perhaps having decided that they had chatted enough already, Alexis underwent a change of demeanor as she put on the face of a knight.

“Now, I am considerably late in asking, but what business did you come here with today?”

“Oh yeah. Here.”

With that, Suimei took out the letter from the leader that he had in his breast pocket and handed it over to Alexis.

After this, Alexis would also participate in Suimei’s battle, but that is a story for another time.

Hydemary’s Detective Memoirs

Leaving the multicolored townscape illuminating the night behind

them, they followed after a man running through the deserted streets. He was running like he was trying to escape from the light exactly because of the people chasing him—magicians of one of the four great magicka organizations, the Society.

Just as the rumors indicated, these two magicians possessed abilities that surpassed this man's. Normally he wasn't the type to run away, but those two were young and there was a large gap in age between him and them. Yet when it came to wits, he was a step ahead of them. As proof, he'd succeeded in easily skirting around them just earlier.

If he ran for just a little longer, he would arrive at the Isar River. As long as he could get to the boat he'd prepared there beforehand, it was only a matter of course that he would escape. Resting his hand against a wall, the man took a breather.

"Heh, to get lured by such a simple illusion. The face of that japanisch dunce was just..."

"Indeed, it's certainly true that Suimei-kun has the face of a dunce, isn't it?"

"—?!"

As the man turned towards the voice that called to him from the side, standing there was one of the two chasing him, the little girl wearing a typical magician's outfit, Hydemary Alzbayne.

"But I do think the dumb look on your face right now is stiff competition. My little Schwein who drank Weissbier to your heart's content, until you were red to the face with pleasure."

"Sheisse! I've been cut off?!"

"Surely if you were running away, you would go to the river. Both Suimei-kun and I thought so. So that's how it is. The net was spread from the very beginning. Oh, and by the way, Suimei-kun only pretended to get caught in your illusion, so don't get ahead of yourself there."

Hydemary corrected the man's misunderstanding. Did she have that much leisure in this situation? Or was she just that cold? In response to her difficult to judge, inhuman expression, the man put on a brave face and a faint smile.

"So what? Are you saying that you'll stop me on your own?"

"What's that? Do you not know who I am?"

"I know you, little princess doll of Alzbayne. You're the magnum opus of the Meister, aren't you?"

"So you do know. Good, good. Besides, in just a little while, that helpless dunce of a pursuer will also get—"

"Just WHO THE HELL is the helpless dunce, huh?! Just saying whatever the hell you want just cause someone isn't around, you god damn puuuuunk?!"

Before Hydemary could finish her sentence, Suimei's indignation rained down from above. Seeing Suimei standing atop the reddish-brown, pointed rooftop overhead, the man made a grim expression.

"So you already fucking caught up? Damn servant of the Society..."

"Don't fucking call me that! It totally makes me sound like an underling!"

"Am I wrong? You're rather famous, you know? People love to talk about the Japaner who became the Magicka King's servant. Heh, it's seriously quite the envious story."

"Is that sarcasm?! Not a single one of you has any idea what I went through to..."

"Well, setting aside whether Suimei-kun is a dunce, or whether he's helpless, or whether he's Lord Nestahaim's errand boy..."

"You've seriously been saying whatever the hell you want for a while now... I'm definitely gonna make you cry later!"

"Oh dear, how filthy. Are you the type who doesn't take no for an answer and forcefully pins a girl down?"

Still maintaining her robotic expression that conveyed no sense of danger whatsoever, Hydemary hugged herself. Suimei yelled at her, telling her to get her mind out of the gutter, though she showed no signs of paying attention to him. Rather, she was flat out ignoring him.

"...What's this? Are you looking for an escape route?"

Just as the man darted his eyes around to get a look at his surroundings, Hydemary slipped close enough to touch noses with him. It happened in the blink of an eye. It was so fast, in fact, that the man could hardly speak as he staggered backward.

"It's useless. Suimei-kun has set up his specialty barrier, and I've also used my Einzelkampf magicka. You have no choice left but to fight me."

"Yeah. Because of you, we had to come here all the way from Munich. Like we're going to let you take more of our time... It'd be no big deal if you just came along quietly. We'd at least treat you to breakfast tomorrow, though there won't be anything but fried potatoes, baked potatoes, or potatoes with green sauce on them."

"I still haven't eaten a pretzel, you know?"

"You can get that kind of crap anywhere!"

"Now, now, Suimei-kun. The way you've been talking totally makes you sound like a small time punk. It's most unpleasant."

"Mind your own business!"

Halfway through the exchange, Hydemary and Suimei seemed to get caught up in their own conversation. It angered the man immensely.

“Fucking yammering on nonstop like that! Do you think you’ve already won, you punks?!”

“It’s part of our introduction, idiot.”

In response to the man’s yelling, Suimei replied with a sigh. Perhaps judging that this was an opening, the man put his magicka to use.

"Ugh, der Sturm trägt eine scharfe Klinge. Damit meine Ermordung jederzeit ruhig ausgeführt werden kann."

[The gale carries a sharp blade. So that my assassination can be carried out quietly at any time.]

The man pulled out a holder from his worn coat that housed several pieces of paper shaped like knives—papers that were draped in mana as they flew into the air, surrounding Hydemary in an instant. Reacting to this, Hydemary twirled her magician’s rod around once, then struck its point against the ground.

“Wirbelwind!”

[Whirlwind!]

A violent whirlwind rose up with Hydemary at its center. The many knives thrown out by the man were caught in it and reduced to confetti. As the spell ran its course, Hydemary unceremoniously took a card case out from her shirt pocket.

“Kartensoldaten. Angriff.”

[Card soldiers. Attack.]

“Bwuh?!”

As the playing cards scattered out of the case, they became moving soldiers that rushed the man all at once. Surrounded by thirty-two soldiers, the man was no longer able to move. They had him completely pinned down.

“And that’s that.”

As Hydemary drew closer, the man’s expression changed. He put on a sympathetic smile.

“Wait a sec. All I did was sell off a few relics, right? Can’t you just let it slide?”

“What do you mean ‘a few’? Don’t you mean a magnificently large amount? Like the Simonia... Well, we know you made quite the profit.”

“Heh, heh heh... Gah!”

While the man was still sitting on his butt, Suimei kicked him right in the face. It was his way of thanking the man for the unexpected detour in their travel schedule.

“It’s over, huh?”

Hydemary looked down at the unconscious man, but Suimei was looking at her with a rather sullen face.

“No, not yet.”

“Did something happen?”

“I’m talking about your abusive remarks. You said whatever you fucking wanted earlier...”

As Suimei reproachfully thrust his index finger at her, Hydemary showed almost no reaction. She was nonchalant, at best.

“Oh? You won’t forgive me? Then what shall we do?”

“Do whatever the hell you want.”

Giving her the cold shoulder, Suimei said nothing and dragged the man away.

“Do you plan on ignoring me? You and I are partners, Suimei-kun. We can’t be separated.”

Hydemary stated that like it was fact. She was going to use it as an excuse and looked rather smug on the matter. However...

“That’s not true.”

“What?”

Glancing over his shoulder at Hydemary, Suimei began rapidly heading towards the hotel as he dragged the man along.

“Suimei-kun?”

When she called out to him, Suimei would not react.

“Suimei-kun.”

Hydemary continued calling out to him, but...

“Suimei...”

Before he realized it, Hydemary was right next to him. As he looked to the side, her face was right there looking up at him. Even though she wasn’t looking ahead, she was walking along with no trouble at all.

Lefille and the Quest to Round Up Cats?

Suimei had asked Lefille to find and collect some stray cats, and she was currently preparing to do exactly that in the southern part of the imperial capital.

For the sake of capturing the culprit behind the coma incidents, Suimei had suddenly requested that she do something that appeared to be completely unrelated. Collecting cats in order to catch the criminal was strange indeed, but even if Lefille didn’t understand the meaning behind it, she knew it must be important if he’d asked her to do it. Based on what she’d seen of Suimei so far, she at least understood that much.

And as she got to work...

“I see... Strays are unexpectedly hard to find.”

Even though she felt like she saw them all the time when it didn’t matter, now that she was trying to find them, they were surprisingly difficult to track down. But since cats liked to lounge around in their

favorite spots during the day, if she could at least figure out where they gathered, it would somehow work out, but...

“When it comes to places stay cats gather, that would be thickets and back alleys, right? Now that I think about it, I’ve even seen them quite a few times in the garden at the Church of Salvation.”

Folding her arms in the middle of a street with little pedestrian traffic, Lefille was pondering where she might have the best luck finding some cats. And then...

“Heh heh. Can I bother you a bit, little lady? Can I?”

Someone called to her from behind. Turning around, she spotted a plump, greasy man.

“...What’s with you?”

“Hey, wanna have some fun with your big brother here? Heh heh heh...”

“Ugh...”

With enough viscosity in his high-pitched voice to make her think he might be some kind of ooze creature, the plump man closed in on her. No matter how she tried to look at him, based on the way he was talking, she couldn’t clear away a very visceral sense of disgust.

“Eheh, how ’bout it?”

“N-No thanks! I’m in a hurry!”

While shouting that, Lefille turned and ran away as fast as she could. She never looked behind her even once. When she thought she was safe, she nestled against a wall and caught her breath.

“Hahh... Just what was that indescribably disgusting man? Hmm, now that I think of it, I heard from Jill that there have been people in the imperial capital with strange tendencies lately...”

Jillbert was very well informed. She stocked up on information like the affairs of the military police and strange events in the cities. And she loved talking about such things. Based on what she’d said recently, the imperial capital had something of a pedophile problem these days. The man she’d just run into was probably part of it. Rather than goodwill, she only sensed wicked thoughts in him.

“If I were in my original form, I could have delivered justice myself... How disappointing...”

With that, Lefille let out a sigh. She’d frantically run away from the situation, so she took a look around to try and figure out where she’d ended up. It seemed she’d made it to a different district of the city. She was somewhere close to the library, the castle, and the high class district.

Among the stone housing complexes, she could see several small, eye-catching restaurants. It was a nice area. The buildings weren’t too tightly packed together, and the sun shone down here uninhibited. But as she looked to the side, she saw the entrance of a maze—the

labyrinthine alleyways common in the residential districts.

“A back alley? Excellent. If there’s any vacant land in there, it’s probably the perfect place for cats to gather.”

With that, Lefille reaffirmed her resolve and pushed on. There was a lot riding on this, so she had to put her all into it.

“Hmm?”

Walking into the alley, she found a single cat. Did it have a docile temperament? Even as she drew nearer, it didn’t move away. It simply yawned. As she pet its head, the cat closed its eyes like it was smiling and then began purring.

“It seems like it’ll be easy to bring it along, but it’s not moving at all...”

The cat showed no sign of going anywhere. Rather than a cat like this, it would likely be better to bring back a more energetic one. Deciding that, Lefille moved on. Further into the alley, she eventually came across an open area.

“Oooh...”

There were plenty of cats in the vacant area. Seeing that mass of fluffiness, Lefille unintentionally raised her voice in admiration. It was a much larger gathering spot than she’d expected. She had plenty of choices here.

“I’m sorry this is so sudden, but please come with me.”

Without trying to conceal the huge grin on her face, Lefille tried talking to the cat she was approaching. In a gentle attempt to capture it, she stuck out both of her arms and tried to pick it up, but as if mocking her, it easily slipped between her hands.

“Hmph... With my body like this, this won’t be easy, will it?”

Watching it run off, Lefille stretched her hands out to try the next cat. With agile movements, it leaped up high atop a pile of rubbish to escape.

“Ugh... What do I do?”

Lefille pondered her options with a grim expression. It was then that she stumbled upon an idea. She would never catch a cat that knew what she was doing. She’d have to catch them by surprise. And arriving at that conclusion...

“There!”

With a sudden burst of energy, she leaped towards a spot where several cats had gathered. But they instantly dispersed, thwarting Lefille’s capture attempt.

“Mm—yow!”

Slamming her head overenthusiastically into the ground, Lefille ended up being the one to let out a sound like a cat. At this rate, she would never get anywhere.

“Now that I think of it, when people call out to cats, they start by

imitating them, right?"

When she thought about how she'd seen others interact with cats, they were always friendly. It made them easier to approach, so perhaps that would work for her too. But when she tried to imagine herself doing it...

"Meow! Psst, psst, psst! Here, kitty, kitty! Meow!"

"L-Like I could do that! I'm an honored swordswoman of Noshias! There's no way I would..."

But she was still catless with no hope of making contact on the horizon. The strays all just watched her from a distance. After fretting over what she should do for quite some time, she took a deep breath and steeled herself.

"Meeew! Come over here, kitties! Come to me! Meow, meow, meow!"

She tried her friendliest meowing, putting her heart and soul into it. But the cats only yawned, scratched their heads with their hind legs, or licked their paws. It was like they had absolutely no interest at all.

"..."

Though still smiling, Lefille froze up on the spot. Her embarrassment was swirling around in her head.

"Ugh, what a disgrace..."

Grumbling out those crestfallen words, Lefille hung her head. It was already almost sunset. She didn't want to go back emptyhanded, but what could she do in this situation?

"...I have no choice, huh?"

With that, Lefille turned around and headed back to the entrance of the alley. Hesitating a bit, she picked up the carefree cat from before and went home. When she arrived...

Hearing mewing, Lefille headed towards the living room and found Suimei there surrounded by many cats.

"Meow!"

"Meow!"

"S-Suimei-kun, what's going on here...?"

"Meow!"

"Meow!"

As Lefille stood there dumbfounded, Suimei turned to her with a rather bright smile.

"Oh, this? I also went around town and brought some back. As expected, it was pretty easy to find a whole bunch of them. Well, the range of behavior for cats is pretty narrow, so I didn't really have to go out of my way to do much, but... Lefi?"

"Even though I went through so much just to bring a single one back..."

Lefille began to vent her anger by repeatedly whapping him.
“You’re so inconsiderate, Suimei-kun! Inconsiderate, I tell you!”
Whap, whap, whap, whap, whap!
“Wh-What’s the matter all of a sudden?”
“Give me back my pride...” she mumbled, sniffling.

On the Way Back from Hadorious’s Mansion

“Well... this is quite a problem, isn’t it?”

While walking down the streets of the evening-painted Kurant City, Reiji let out a sigh like he had a headache. An hour ago, he’d been invited by Hadorious to have a chat with him, and was now just on his way back from that.

He’d gained some insight into Hadorious based on their conversation, mostly in realizing that they were completely incompatible. He’d threatened to take hostages if the need arose, and he was using that threat to force them into taking an unwanted detour in their journey.

No, I can’t just sit here and complain. It’s not just the demons. From now on, I need to deal with the ulterior motives of people from other countries and Hadorious.

Realizing that he was just griping about the situation he’d found himself in, Reiji shook such thoughts out of his head. Their journey had only just begun. This would only be the first of the difficulties they were to experience. He would have to be able to deal with all sorts of things, even Hadorious. That’s why he had to come out on top everywhere he could. And that man was willing to lay his hands on Suimei. Reiji would at least have his revenge for that, though confirming Suimei’s safety came first.

“Hmm? Isn’t that...?”

As he got closer to the inn, he spotted a familiar silhouette standing in the middle of a grove of trees within the city. Looking closely, he could see that it was Titania.

It was unusual to see her alone without even a single guard, but... she seemed to be focusing on the trees in front of her or something. It was as if she was a still body of water without a single ripple. As if she had become one with the nature around her. She was likely meditating on her magic. Whenever she had time, she would train however she could. She was apparently quite diligent and hardworking.

Before long, she drew a wooden sword out of nowhere.

This was quite strange. For a girl who fought with magic to be holding a wooden sword, just what did it mean? He could understand if it were a short sword for self-defense, but he couldn’t understand

what application a wooden sword that was about as long as the one he used had in magic training.

But the moment she took a stance with her sword as if there were an enemy before her, that thought was blown away.

“...”

A stance aimed to strike at the eyes, was it? The moment she struck it, Reiji felt like time came to a stop. It wasn't like anything he'd ever seen before, either in this world or his. And he couldn't see a single weakness in it.

Too absorbed in watching Titania, however, he forgot to pay attention to his footsteps.

“Who goes?!”

Hearing the rustling of leaves on the ground, Titania realized he was there. And as she turned towards him, she had a vigilant, hostile sword at the ready.

“U-Um, sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you.”

“Reiji-sama?! Why are you here?!”

“I finished talking with the duke and was headed back to the inn. I just happened to see you over here on the way.”

“I-Is that so...? Well, what did that man have to say?”

“That's... There was a lot, so I'd prefer to wait and discuss it all with everyone at the inn. But what about you, Tia? Were you in the middle of some kind of training?”

“I... I... No!”

As Reiji inquired about what she'd been doing, she flashed an amazed expression for a single instant, and then panicked and tried to hide the wooden sword in her right hand behind her back.

“What's wrong?”

“N-No, i-i-i-it's nothing at all! I was just thinking of doing a little bit of magic training! That's all!”

“But you had a sword at the ready just now, right?”

“W-Were you watching?!”

She threw out that question, still completely gripped by surprise, and Reiji nodded back to her. Then, hanging her head low, she muttered to herself in a quiet voice.

“Goodness, what a careless blunder...”

“What's that? Did you say something? I couldn't really hear you.”

“No, nothing at all... Um, i-in truth, lately we have been coming across powerful monsters. Thinking it may be a problem in the future, I thought I should also start practicing to use a sword.”

“You were practicing to use a sword? All on your own?”

“I-I was too embarrassed to be seen by anyone!”

“But isn't it better to have a teacher for this kind of thing?”

“I-I was taught the basics by Gregory and the captain of the guard,

so it's alright!"

Titania pitched forward emphatically as she spoke. It sounded a bit like she was making excuses in a panic, but as she said, it was likely from embarrassment. Looking at her, Reiji thought of an idea.

"Hey, Tia, do you want to try practicing with me?"

"With you, Reiji-sama? I'm afraid I don't have a practice sword for you."

"Here."

Reiji picked up a nearby fallen tree branch.

"Oh? Why is there such a convenient tree branch..."

"There are plenty of trees here, after all."

Titania then averted her gaze like she had been seized with fear.

"Um, I, even without a training partner..."

"There's no need to hold back. If you're fine with me, I'll be your partner as much as you want."

Reiji smiled at her pleasantly. Despite all her training, Titania had no technique to resist that smile.

"...Thank you kindly."

When Reiji took a stance with the branch in hand, Titania made her move. However...

"Um, take thaaaaaat!"

Letting out a somehow spiritless yell, Titania came at him slowly. Reiji nimbly dodged her swing. She then tried for another blow with yet another awkward shout.

"Let's see... Hyaaaaah!"

"..."

Reiji silently evaded that one as well. He couldn't sense any urgency at all from her. To the point where he couldn't even imagine this was the same girl who'd struck that stance from before. After yet another one of her swings was dodged, Titania spoke up with a forced smile.

"A-As one would expect of Reiji-sama. My sword didn't even graze you!"

"...Hey, Tia? Are you taking this seriously?"

As Reiji gave her a somewhat astonished and somewhat dubious look, Titania cringed like he'd just hit a bullseye.

"What?"

"You're not, right? There's no way."

"That is not the case! I've just never once used a sword before this!"

"But even then, this is... Back when you saved me from Rajas's attack, I felt like your movements were much sharper."

"Th-That was a good example of a miracle under pressure! At the time, my body just moved on its own..."

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

They both exchanged surprised looks. That wasn't what Reiji had expected her to say.

“...Tia, didn't you use magic then?”

When Reiji said that, Titania couldn't help the “oh crap” expression that flashed on her face.

“Y-Yes, of course! I used magic to save you, Reiji-sama!”

It seemed that they really weren't on the same page. It felt like she was just forcing herself to agree with everything he said.

“Tia, are you hiding something from me?”

“Th-There is not a single thing that I would hide from you, Reiji-sama! Nothing!”

“Really?”

“Really!”

Titania nodded her head up and down vigorously. The overenthusiasm was extremely suspicious. Reiji raised an eyebrow as he watched this unfold, when...

“Oh... Oh no!”

With a completely forced cry, Titania tripped over nothing at all and fell towards Reiji's arms. Though regarding this all as completely fishy, Reiji caught her and held her up.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes!”

After replying in a loud voice, she tightly squeezed on to him. Thinking that it was a little cute, Reiji scratched his head.

“What in the world...?”

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing the bonus volume 3 stories. In these, we ended up covering various topics like Lefille's cute side, the reappearance of Felmenia's clumsy and incompetent side, and some sides of other, less familiar characters.

The story will be heating up gradually from here, so if this work could become a source of enjoyment for everybody, that would fill me with joy.

-Gamei Hitsuji

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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 3
by Gamei Hitsuji

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